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Synopsis:

Chang An, capital of Tang. General Xuan Wei was accused of treason because he offended Great General Xiang Hou, leading to the execution of all of his family members. Amidst the incident, a young boy named Ning Que managed to get away, dug out from a pile of corpses along with a little girl called Sang Sang. Years passed, and since that day the two of them lived together. Together with Sang Sang they both entered the military, with plausible military achievements, they were recommended into the Scholar School, which began their miraculous journey.

Is Ning Que a son of a demon, or an incarnation of a saint...

Raws:

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Chapter 1: Rain in Wei, Youngster in Wait

During the spring time of year thirteen, rain poured down upon a city in the region of the Tang empire.

This city is the city of Wei located in the northwestern borderline of the empire. Since the original purpose of the settlement was to counter the invasion of barbarians from the Great Plain, the walls of the fort have been reinforced to an extreme degree. As a result of the enhancements, the walls protecting the city had a sturdy and muddy external appearance.

When the wind started to blow during the dry seasons, the mud on the walls will break off and swirl around in the air only to land on the cheaply made military camps and on the soldiers themselves. The mud invaded every part of the city painting the city brown from inside out. When people went to sleep and shook their blankets, a mini-sandstorm can form out of the dust.

It's early spring and soldiers welcomed the rain cheerfully because it would wash away all the dusts on the roof. More importantly, the eyes of people seem to be cleansed by the long missing rain - At least the eyes of Ma Shi Xiang are flashing under the rain.

As the highest rank officer in Wei City, Ma Shi Xiang's current attitude can be described as humble. Although he is unsatisfied about the muddy foot prints on the luxurious carpets, he covered his dissatisfaction up perfectly by acting surprised.

He bowed before an elderly dressed in a dirty robe. " Well-respected

elder, although I'm not sure what other materials the noble guest in the camp needs, I did prepare a hundred soldiers for escort if she desperately wants to leave tomorrow."

The elder smiled warmly and pointed at the shadows in the camp while shaking his head to show no complains. Suddenly, a cold and proud female voice came out of the camp. "There is no need, just finish your own business."

Ma Shi Xiang did not spent too much time to figure out the true identity of the noble guest in the camp when their mass entered Wei city this morning. He showed no sign of negative attitude or complaints against her self-centered and harsh response.

The silence in the camp broke off when the guest suddenly spoke, "The trip from Wei City to the capital has to go through Mount Min. The roads in the mountain may collapse any minute due to this heavy rain..... Get me a guide from the military so I can get through the mountain safely."

Ma Shi Xiang was stunned for a moment until he remembered a hateful guy. He thought deeply for a few seconds and answered, "it shall be done."

Outside of the military camp, several military officers look at each other with different facial expressions, some felt sorry, some felt reluctant to let go, some felt rejoice while some felt surprised, but none of them had expected that Ma Shi Xiang will actually choose that person to serve as the noble's guide.

"General, are you really ready to let him go that easily?" One officer said

surprisingly.

Wei Village is not big, even summing up all the officers and soldiers the city won't have more than three hundred soldiers. The military camp far away from rich places sometimes seems more like a bandit's nest. The so called "general" is simply the lowest rank in the army. However Ma Shi Xiang direct troops extremely strict, or we can say this Wei Village "bandit" leader really liked others to call him "general," so even during daily conversation, his subordinates always addressed Ma Shi Xiang as general.

Ma Shi Xiang, wiped off the rain on his face, looks at the yellow ponding near the military camp and took a deep breath. "We can't always keep him in a place that can't support his talent. The response of the recommendation letter had come on for more than half of a year already. A bright future is ahead for that kid, and he has to go to the Capital to take the test to get into a respectable academy. Also, him going with the noble to the capital will bring him favor when he go to the capital."

"I doubt that noble will care..."The military officer answered irritably.

The door behind opened and a pretty maid walked in, looked at Ma Shi Xiang and the military officers "Let me see the guide."

She did not hide her arrogance at all while facing the court's general, after all, she is the personal maid of the noble.

Prime Minister's door guards, nobles' maids, prince's guests are the most troublesome type of people to deal with. If you get close to them, you will get complaints but if too far away, you will get trouble. They are

the most annoying to deal with. So naturally Ma Shi Xiang really didn't want to deal with these kind of people. He casually talked for a bit and called one officer over to take this noble's maid to meet the kid.

When the rain had finally paused, the city of Wei was as clean as it can be. Along the way, trees along the side started to show the early signs of spring, yet the city is too small even though the landscape is so beautiful. Not soon after, the officer already led the maid to the destination, a shabby but lively room.

Hearing the noises from the room, the maid frowned slightly 'Are they really drinking wines in a military camp during the day?' Wind blew up the curtains, the sound inside suddenly got clear, as expected, the people were playing the finger-guessing game(a drinking game at feasts, kinda like rock paper scissor), but they are not playing the regular one -- as the maid listened to the details inside, a quick humiliation appeared on the maid's pretty face, and she secretly clenched up her fist.

"Let's play a lustful finger guessing game, uh! Who is lustful? Uh, you are lustful! Who is lustful? Uh, you are lustful! Who is lustful? Uh, you are lustful!.... "

The filthy sounds echoed back and forth and seem to never end, actually, the game lasts for a really long time and there hasn't been a winner yet. The maid gets more and more angry as time passed. She lifted the curtains and gave a furious look into the room, and saw a kid at the first moment, who sat opposite to the desk.

That kid is about 15 or 16 year old, wearing a cotton-made jacket that

was commonly seen in the troop. His jacket was really dirty, his hair was curled up, and a bit oily, but his face was really clean, which makes his freckles really clear.

"Who is lustful? Uh, you are lustful!"

Completely different from the dirty words, the kid's facial expression is especially serious. Not only did he not look lustful, but also his face suggested a sense of holiness. His right hand keeps playing this finger guessing game, giving out his fist like the wind. It seems like winning the game is more important than his life.

"I win!"

The long lasting game finally ended, the black hair kid waves his right arm forcefully, declaring his victory, and smiled happily.

However, the kid's opponent didn't want to admit his loss, and insisted that the kid changes his fist when he is yelling "Who is lustful?" So the room becomes a mess as the people started to argue. The audiences on the sides each had their own inclinations, and no one is able to convince the others. At this time, someone suddenly shouted out, "As usual, listen to Sang Sang!"

Everyone then puts his eyes toward a corner of the room, there was a 12 year old girl moving a bucket. She was really skinny, her skin was dark, and she has a common face. The clothes she was wearing seems to be way too big in comparison to her size, most likely her master stole this clothes from somewhere. She was moving a bucket that was probably heavier than her own weight, and it's obvious that she looked very tired.

The little maid whose name is "Sang Sang" puts down the bucket and turns around, soldiers look at her nervously, they are just like the gamblers waiting for the dealer to declare the result. Obviously, people can tell that such situations happened more than once already.

The little maid frowned as she looked at the kid, then looked towards the angry soldier who sits opposite to the kid with a serious expression, "At the 23rd turn, you gave out scissor, he gave out rock, but you said 'he is lustful,' so you lost at that time already."

The people all started to laugh, and spread out. That soldier scolded as he pays the money, the kid accepted the money happily. He taped the soldier's shoulder to show honest console,

"Think optimistically, this entire Wei city..... no, this entire world, who can win against me, Ning Que?"

The maid's facial expression was filled with disappointment, so the general who stood next to her was starting to worry as well. He clinched the curtain with his fist, took a deep breath, and was about to cough to warn Ning Que but the cold stare of the maid interpreted his actions.

After stopping the general to warn the guy, the maid followed the youngster and his servant out the camp to observe them carefully. The general had no idea what the maid wanted to do, so he thought it was an exotic habit of people from the upper class.

The youngster named Ning Que did not show any special routine on his way home. He bought some food, chatted with the fat lady at the tavern, and seemed to enjoy his life. The only thing that angered the maid was that the tiny servant following Ning Que was struggling to carry a heavy water barrel while he showed no sign to help.

Even though the empire had a specific and strict social structure, the culture was very simple and honest. Even in the capital, where prosperity and immorality coexist, people could not just stand there and see a little girl suffer without feeling sympathetic.

"They allowed servants in the military?" the beautiful maid asked the general calmly, trying to suppress her anger.

The general scratched his head and answered, "There was a huge drought and famine few years back, countless refugee poured into the southern states and the border cities. There were dead bodies everywhere on the sides of streets. I heard Ning Que dug Sang Sang out of dead body piles and saved her. He was an orphan as well. They lived and supported each other to this day."

The general continued, "when he enlisted, his only request was to bring the little girl into the Wei city," he looked at the maid and explained carefully, "we all know the rules of military does not allow such situation, but their condition was quite special. It was hard to push a little girl into her doom, so everyone just pretended.....to know nothing."

After listening to the explanation, the maid started to feel better, but after looking at Ning Que carrying the roast chicken around cheerfully while the little servant struggled to move the water barrel, her mood turned terrible again. "Is this living and supporting each other? he clearly

wanted to kill that little girl!"

Wei city truly was small, after a little while, the four man crew arrived at a small house in the southern part of the city. There was a tiny rock garden outside of the house, and around the garden there was a simple fence where the maid and general were standing and looked into the house.

The tiny maid pushed the water barrel next to a tank and stepped onto a small wooden bench. She used all of her strength to pour the water into the tank. Quickly, she started to wash the vegetable and cleaned the rice. Waiting for the food to cook, she took a piece of rag and started to wipe the desks, chairs, doors, and windows. Not for long, steam rose from the stove and covered around her small body.

Although it was raining last night, the water didn't wash away the dust on the windows, but rather left muddy watermarks on them. These watermarks had been quickly erased by the wiping of Sang Sang. The small house had suddenly became much brighter and cleaner.

It was clear that she does these chores daily, her actions were swift and experienced. It was easy to feel silly and sympathize for the girl when she move around busily as sweat ran down her face.

Except the guy, Ning Que seemed to be lacking these two emotions. He calmly sat on a bamboo chair with his left hand flipping through an old book and his right hand holding a tree branch writing things on the wet muddy floor. Sometimes when he started to ponder, he throws the tree branch away and flipped his palm upward, and there would be a cup of hot tea served right to him.

The soldier of Wei city got used to this frame for a while now, so they didn't see anything out of place. But the gaze of the noble guest outside of the fence got colder and harsher by the moment. Especially when she saw that the young maid had to check up on the youngster and serve his needs while she did the hard chores, the noble guest's complexion frozen and was filled with hatred.

Chapter 2: The Wise and Poor Kid

‘Even if she is your servant, but didn’t you risk your life digging her out of dead body piles? Didn’t people say you guys live and support each other? Even if she is your maid, don’t you think she is a little too young for the extreme physical labors? How did a man of young age like you have such a lazy habit and not do anything yourself?’

Perhaps triggered by haunted child memory, the personal maid had a bad impression of Ning Que using the maid to do physical labor. The personal maid of the noble pushed open the fence’s entrance and walk straight in. Landing her eyes on the old book Ning Que was reading and scoffed, “ I thought you are reading some ancient philosophical work, making you lose sense of all your surroundings, but it is just a regular meditation book that is overflowing throughout the market. A lowlife like you wish to Xiu Xing?*”

Ning Que sat up from the chair and straighten his back, curiously looking at the lady in fancy clothing and peeked at the embarrassed general, stopped and explains, “Unfortunately only this book was available on the market so I bought it out of curiosity, I have no extravagant wishes to Xiu Xing..”

Clearly the maid did not expect the young man to answer so freely, and couldn’t find a reply to his explanation. She turned and looked toward the young girl who is dumping out the furnace ash, and spoke unhappily, “How does the powerful Tang empire breed a man like you.”

Ning Que wrinkled his eyebrows confusingly, and saw the maid’s eyes were on Sang Sang, who is holding the rag cleaning the windows. He

realized the reason for the maid’s piercing speech and smiled. “From the look of it, you are older than me. Well... you can treat me as a little boy instead of a man.”

Perhaps the maid hadn’t seen anyone who is as shameless as the youngster in front of her. Her fists started to clinch together and her anger was about to burst out, but when her eyes land on the writings on the muddy earth next to the bamboo chair, she lost all of her thoughts and forgot what she was about to say.

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In the best military camp of Wei city, the elder in the dirty robe is resting with his eyes closed. The general is bowing while he was talking to the noble guest in the camp. His humble attitudes contain an expression of deep surprise.

“You are not satisfied with the guide I chose?” he asked confusingly, “For what reason?”

The noble guest rebuked strongly, “I asked for a guide with experience and ability, not a lazy youngster whose head is full of wishful dreams Xiu Xing and has no strength to even catch a chicken.”

Ma Shi Xiang coughed lightly and explained quietly, “To my acknowledgement, although Ning Que is young as he is, he did obtain some barbarians heads in the last few years, it should not be a problem.....to catch a few chicken.

Tang Empire used strength and warfare to conquer and rose in power. They treated military honor and achievements above all else. Although the noble guest in the camp is from an extremely high background, she has shamed the honor of the military so Ma Shi Xiang defended Ning Que by refuting the guest's rebuke.

The cold voice behind the camp was silent for a moment, and spoke again unhappily, "The ability to kill makes a good guide?"

Ma Shi Xiang's replied even more humbly, "Out of three hundred soldiers in Wei city, Ning Que is definitely not the one who killed the most enemy. However I can swear with my life - no matter how harsh and extreme the situation or battle, the last person standing..... Will be Ning Que.

Then Ma Shi Xiang rose his head, smiling, "Due to his contribution, he was awarded a recommendation letter from the military. He works hard himself, passed the first exam half a year ago. This trip to the capital, he will be reporting to the Academy."

After hearing the word 'Academy', the noble guest in the camp was in a complete silence and never spoke again.

After Ma Shi Xiang left the camp, the elder in the old robe slowly opened his eyes. The old and calm pupils shined with interest, he looked at the camp and smiled warmly, "A soldier in a small and isolated town like this got into the Academy? That's quite surprising. If so, then letting him be the guide is not a bad idea since his characteristics and ability is probably the best of the best."

“Even if I left the empire for a year, I would have never expected that the Academy are accepting such brute.”

Although her tone still showed distaste towards Ning Que, but her actual attitude had changed. At least the noble guest didn't reject him to be the guide of the group anymore. Only needing a mention of name to change the idea of a noble person, this simple placed named Academy is for sure not simple at all.

The elder brought up another topic he was confused about, “Earlier I went to see the words Ning Que wrote on the ground, he was copying the third chapter of Extreme Sense. His penmanship was simple yet lively, although he only used a tree branch, the words on the muddy floor contains a sense of sharpness, piercing almost like a blade. Clearly he mastered the Military Calligraphy..... I do wonder how he practices, and who his teacher is.”

“That little soldier only had a small insight. It may seem unique at first, but now thinking it through he was only writing in some weird way. Mastered? at best he can only become a ghostwriter.” The noble replied indifferently.

The elder shook his head, “The highlight is exactly what you said, ‘unique’. I’m not an expert at calligraphy, but looking at his strokes of writing I can sense an element of metal and stone. This element rarely exists among calligraphists, perhaps a charmist***.”

“Are you implying a Talisman of God?” The noble was stunned for a second, but scoffed at her own idea, “There are billion of people in the world, but only a few charmist living. Those expert are either hiding in the palace or training in temples. They spend their own life meditating to

absorb the qi of nature, yet that youngster has no wave of qi around his body - for sure he is just a regular person. Even if he reads another fifty year of Extreme Sense he cannot enter the primary stage, speaking less of comparing him to those experts."

The elder smiled a bit, but did not speak another word. Although he had the noble's respect because he is a Xiu Xingist, their social status differs greatly. The so-called respect was only due to his old age and ability, so it is best not to argue with the noble anymore.

However, the elder did not agree with the noble in the camp. He has his own evaluation of the young man. In this world most people are unable to Xiu Xing. It is common to see none out of ten thousand people who entered the primary stage through meditating and absorbing the qi of nature. But if Ning Que is able to enter the Academy and study there, furthermore, if he was lucky enough to step up and enter the second floor, the uniquely weird calligraphy of his will help him for sure.

Even if that boy couldn't Xiu Xing, just by using his calligraphy he can shock and surprise the teachers in the Academy and temples, or at least he can teach the famous calligraphists a thing or two.

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Ning Que put down the book, shook his head and walked out with disappointment and unwillingness on his face.

The book called Extreme Sense, bought during his childhood on his way to a fair in Kai Ping with the military supply group. As the noble's maid

said it was a common thing that anyone can get at anywhere. He clearly understood that, but he still didn't forget to recite and study it daily, treating it like the legendary Seven Scrolls of the Way that is being consecrated in one of the forbidden lands, the Great Sky Way.

The book's corner was already curled due to long time uses, if Sang Sang didn't use cotton thread to sew the back of the book, it would fall apart immediately. Unfortunately, after many years, the book's pages were badly thumbed, and its words and sentences were printed in Ning's memory, yet Ning Que still could not find the entry to the Xiu Xing. Now, he could not even achieve Sensation, the simplest part mentioned in the book.

At some point in the past he did feel disappointed and even despaired until he knew that most people in the world could not sense the Qi of nature. He felt much calmer knowing that he has this talent -- yes, those experts are not regular people, they are the special ones, because only the extremely rare experts could sense the Qi of nature, otherwise anyone could fly around Chang An, since there are so many Extreme Sense's** in the world.

Nonetheless Ning Que was really normal, or common. However, if you suddenly discovered a mountain of treasures, but you can only return with bare hands and if you suddenly discovered that Qi fully filled the world around you yet you cannot not even use it, how would you feel?

.....
.....

"The Wei City is such a poor place. The barbarians on the Great Plain were already scared of the Tang Emperor. They haven't dared to fight us

for years so I could not earn military exploits that fast. It would be perfect if I get to go to the Capital, why would I feel unwilling?"

Inside the dark military camp, Ning Que gave a salute to show respect to the general, then explained gratefully and honestly, "Yet now it's still far away from the registration date to the Academy, I think it's not necessary for me to leave so early. In these years, even though I did not evolve into a much better person under the leadership of general, but I still learned a lot, otherwise now I would not have the chance to enter the Academy. I sincerely want to stay in Wei City and stay at your side for a few more days so I hear your lectures. Even if it is only for a few more days, I would like to spend my time with you."

Ma Shi Xiang looked at the youngster, with beard slightly flowing, not sure if it's because of the wind or the result of his irritation, said, "Ning Que, since when did you become such a shameless person?"

Ning Que replied seriously, "If the situation requires me to discard my honor and reputation, I am willing to throw it away without hesitation."

"Speak the truth, " Ma Shi Xiang's facial expression became cold and asked seriously, "why don't you want to serve as their guide?"

Ning Que remained silently for a long time, then whispered, "General, that noble probably doesn't like me."

"The noble doesn't like you?" Ma Shi Xiang scolded loudly, "You seemed to forget your status. Keep in mind that you are still not a student of the Academy yet. As a soldier of the Empire, you have to obey higher rank officials' commands, obey my command! It's none of your business

whether the noble likes you or not! You only need to accept the command and then complete it!"

Ning Que did not reply, bowed slightly, looking down at a piece of grass growing out from the soil between his shoes. Remaining silent meant disagree.

Ma Shi Xiang did not know what to do with this kid. "What do you want to do? Why don't you follow their way to the Capital?"

Ning Que looked up to the general, spoke gratefully and seriously, "I have seen their carriage. They must have encountered an assault on the Great Plain. Recently there was a spring famine and the chief of the Zuo Jing Tribe died last year. The skin of that noble's maid is somewhat dark, so... I dare not to go with them."

The carriage's encounter of an assault, the famine of the Great Plain, the death of the Chief, and the dark skin of the maid. These details may seem unrelated, but as he linked them together, they formed up his reason of not leaving the Wei City with the noble.

Ma Shi Xiang looked at him, sighed and asked, "You realized who they are already?"

"Among the entire Wei City, who still didn't realize who they are? "

Ning Que could not help but shrugged his shoulders and looked towards the dark side of the military camp, "Only the ignorant princess highness herself, who grew up in the royal temple in Chang An and

married to the Chief in the Great Plain, would not know that her husband had already died. Her identity is not that big of a secret."

= Xiu Xing - Like in Stellar Transformation the people is practice to become immortals this is like the term for meditation to become stronger by understanding the universe and the natural laws or gather qi from nature

** = Low level books to teach and allow people to xiu xing to become stronger and improve their abilities. (there are many different paths)

*** = Charmist-Fighters who specialize in the process of making talismans and using them in combat.

Chapter 3: Tang's Simplicity is Respect

The empire's culture is rather open, plus it was discussion at night in a military camp. But after hearing the words 'ignorant princess', Ma Shi Xiang's facial expression turned worrisome.

After the noble woman entered Wei city, he was so careful of his words and actions. Ma Shi Xiang never thought Ning Que would give such a harsh comment toward the noble guest so carelessly. Moreover, he thought Ning Que's evaluation of the guest was inappropriate and unfair, which made him even angrier.

Everyone knew that the fourth princess of Tang Empire was not an idiot and not arrogant, but in fact the opposite was true. She is a wise and caring princess.

A vastful empire like Tang, with its formidable military force, was not afraid of anyone. Even when Tang was against numbers of other central empires and the tribes of the Great Plain, it never thought of diplomacy through marriage. Except during the early years of Tang, some of the generals of the first emperor were from the Great Plain. They married some daughters of the royal family to establish greater bond and loyalty.

But three years ago the tribes of Great Tribe was in a turmoil, the enemy of the Tang empire stirred up an invasion in the largest tribe in the Great Plains to invade the Tang Empire. During such an emergency, the youngest princess of Tang at the age of fourteen, kneeled in front of the Royal Palace for days. She requested to marry the chief of the tribe to achieve peace. Although the request was against the will of the entire empire, she went her own way and forfeited the flourishing of Chang

An and entered the Great Plain for the peace treaty.

After the marriage was announced, the entire world was shocked and people were discussing all over the streets. Old officials requested meeting with the emperor during the night to discuss the said matter. Emperor himself released his angers by smashing countless luxurious jaded cups, and the queen was silent due to her mixed feelings toward her daughter's decisions. However, all the protests couldn't stop the girl's determined mind. After knowing all this, the chief of the tribe was astonished and took the princess for a liking. He ordered five thousand lambs, cows, and horses as tribute to the Tang empire to marry the young princess. In the end the Tang emperor reluctantly decided to let his daughter marry far out into the Great Plain.

After the young princess arrived the Great Plain and married the chief, the couple was respectful and cared each other. The once ambitious leader of the barbarian race became a calm lion of the prairie. He defended the territory of the Great Plain but dare not to invade an inch of Tang's land.

Except the unexpected happened. The chief died suddenly during his prime years, and his younger brother succeeded the position as the head chief. The situation around the borders once again became hostile.

Despite the current situation, there was a valuable period of peace for five years between the Great Plain and Tang empire. From the moment when the princess kneeled before the Royal Palace, there was no war, and she had all the contribution for the achievement.

Rumors said that the reason for the determination of the princess to go out to the Great Plain was to avoid the queen. If even this was true, in the

eyes of the military general and court officials, it was the right thing to do. The fourth princess did not abuse the emperor's love and avoided problems with the queen, which helped to sustain the stability of the upper class and the entire empire.

On the other hand, the princess's actions was almost like a slap on the face towards the military generals and soldiers who defended the borderline. They were not afraid of barbarians nor warfares. They felt they were ashamed by her actions of marrying their enemy for diplomacy. However, no one will reject the god-send peace.

Therefore their feelings toward the princess was very complicated, with some unreasonably anger, but also appreciation. All those thoughts mixed together and became an emotion of indescribable respect.

Ning Que was just a regular soldier, so it was hard to say if he understands the mixed feelings of the general. However it did not matter, his current situation will determine his future and safety, and Ning Que took his life very seriously - perhaps more important than anything else. He pretended not to noticed the gloomy face of the general and continued, "I estimated the number of arrow holes, it was clear that new chief was pretty determined on killing the entire carriage. I bet half of the original group died on the Great Plain due to ambushes and assassinations. "

"They said there was an encounter of some marauders ," Ma Shi Xiang showed some suspicion on his expression. Even he did not believe the story.

"Even the chief of Great Plain himself dare not attack the princess of Tang under broad daylight. So.....it can only be marauders, except

everyone knows who was behind them." Ning Que continued, "But something was off, if everyone knows that the marauders were the cavalry from the Great Plain, why were the tribe so daring? Do they not fear that the wrath of Tang will seek revenge and eliminate the entire tribe?"

Tang declared independence based on its strength. Its culture was simple yet competitive. It's known as the strongest nation on the world, so it concerned the most about honor, yet if it really wanted to completely destroy the barbarians on the Great Plain, it would exhaust more than half of the nation's wealth and power.

Just to revenge for the assault of the princess, which would cause the entire nation to suffer, may seem impossible to happen, but in fact, such things were common in Tang's history.

The most famous example happened when Tang's first Emperor was still in charge,

A tribe on the Great Plain massacred a small village called White Sheep, one hundred and forty people were killed. Emperor's messenger went to the tribe to ask what happened, yet he was expelled with one ear cut off by the tribe's chief,. The first Emperor felt extremely angry, immediately decided to invade the Great Plain. As a result, the entire nation prepared for the war, supporting a troop of 80,000 calvaries marching north. The tribe was frightened and fled to the northern Great Plain under huge wind and snow, yet Tang's cavalry troop followed all the way without hesitation. The battle lasted for several months, and the entire tribe was eventually slaughtered.

Fighting battles for months, destroying the opponent tribe, these

results may seem simple, and these may seem glorious, yet they at same time took Tang Empire a great amount of costs.

To afford such exhausting war, the court sent millions of farmers and levied three provinces of livestock. Because of this war, the tax in the South quadrupled, the citizens all got angry, court officials had no time and energy to take care of their work, and even worse, the entire world was on the edge of collapse.

Tang Empire's most marvellous quality, was shown clearly from this one of the most dangerous moment ever and the later evaluations towards it.

When the Tang cavalry marched onto the Great Plain, the rebels in the South, surprisingly, did not attack the empire at its weakest moment, but rather returned to their bases. It looks like that they didn't want to hinder Tang's march. Maybe the rebels wanted to grab the opportunity to rebel when the Tang Empire was at its weakest. Maybe they hadn't felt connected to the "pride of the empire," but in the end they didn't attack. They had to face the reality that the poor peasants who used to support them before, all remained silent to show their opposition to the leaders of the rebellion party, at the moment when Tang was in danger.

Tang's first Emperor who won this battle did not have a high historical status. He didn't have a respectable status even within the empire. Not even in historical records or in the travelers poets' stories, there were no good evaluations of the Emperor. Many considered him as totalitarian and harsh.

But even the most conservative scholar, the Academy professors who didn't care about the sovereign at all and the farmers and merchants who hated taxations the most, they will find different kinds of reasons to

criticize this emperor. But none of the people think the battle solely caused by the Emperor's anger, which exhausted the nation's wealth, should not be fought.

Because since the establishment of country, the people on this land insist to believe and defend a simple reason: I will not invade you, but you cannot invade me, even if I invade you, but you.....shall not invade me!

No matter who invades me, I will invade back.

This is Tang Empire's basis to establish the nation.

This is Tang Empire's road to strengthen the nation.

This is why the strongest nation in the world is called Tang.

Chapter 4: The Future Discussion of an Irregular Tang

The Tang empire was treated as the strongest empire based on a simple trait - its power.

Ning Que was not the typical civilian you expected to see. When he was on the battlefield, he didn't seem be the type that fight until victory or with death. Even if he lived in Wei city for another two decades, he would not be able to craft an astonishing history where a beggar advanced to be a general.

But he had stayed in the army long enough to grasp precisely the rather precious and almost romantic traits of the Tangs. At the moment he discovered the arrows holes on the princess's carriage, he inferred some troubling-inducing business. The current chief of the Great Plain was daring enough to assassinate the princess of Tang empire! Either the chief had truly gone mad, or there are actual powerful figures in the government of Tang backing him up.

"The fourth princess had already stepped into the boundary of Tang and entered Wei city, but she never revealed her true identity. What is the reason? because there wasn't a vocabulary as 'trust' in her mind anymore. Perhaps she trusted the emperor, but for sure she has no faith in the officials. She didn't believe in you, the general, she didn't trust the military, she probably didn't even trust the entire court."

"Because she knew very well that if there was no figure in the capital allowing the barbarians to ambush her, they would not dared to attack. And the number of figures powerful enough to make such a deal? no more than four, and she will not want to mess with any of those four

characters.”

“Even you, the general, wanted to stay away from this kind of upper class turmoil as far as possible, speak less of minions like me,” Ning Que stepped on the wet muddy ground with his heels, and whispered, “Troubles will definitely occur during the trip. I may hold down three to five people in a battle, but it is no use in a situation like this.”

“If I join the carriage, there will be one more dead body in the mountain side; if I don’t join, Wei City can have one more honest soldier.”

“Please general, just pretend that I am a tiny useless trace of Qi of nature, and you expect nothing out of me.”

Ma Shi Xiang looked at the humble youngster and signed, “Pretend you are a trace of Qi? is that humble or self-pride? If you really want me to take this order back, maybe you can compare yourself to a fart.”

Ning Que laughed and replied, “Well, I am about to become a student of the Academy, so I think it’s best for me to choose my words wisely.”

Ma Shi Xiang stopped teasing the child. He wrinkled his eyebrows and was silent for a brief moment, “The reason for me recommending you as the guide of the carriage..... is related to the Academy business,” he explained, “You have enough contribution, you passed the first exam, and I wrote you a recommendation letter to the school. But you really think this is enough to get you into the Academy?”

“All these years you stayed on the borderline of the empire. Even if you

heard some stories about the Academy, you have no idea what kind of place it represented.”

The general’s expression slowly became serious and heavy, “The Academy is the most prestigious, righteous, and sacred place in the hearts of civilians of Tang. Obtaining a military recommendation and report only means you are able to enter the test of the Academy. But if you really want to step over the glorious entry of the school, then you have to get at least three stamps from different apartments of the court.....”

“Those apartments won’t take a recommendation letter from a low rank general like me to heart. Even the military guidance doesn’t have much power. If they want, the apartments can easily delay your exam date for several years. This situation is pretty common lately. Besides the private students of teachers in the Academy, any applicants who use the court route need to use money to buy their way in. There are countless middle class families that went bankrupted just to enter that one test!”

“I know that you saved some money in Wei City in the two years, but do you really that you can fulfill those people with barely a few hundred silver coins?”

Ning Que scratched the back of his head, sighed emotionally and said, “No one told me about this thing before.”

“Because now there is a way to solve this thing, so there is no need to tell you about it.”

Ma Shi Xiang glanced at him and spoke unhappily, “As long as you

achieve merits on

your way to Chang An, so the noble would favor you, or even simply remember your name. Later if any butler of the Princess's mansion will help you say something, then which government office would dare to blackmail you?"

"So this means that I have to use my life to gamble for an eligibility for the entry test to the Academy. How come it sounds somewhat not worthwhile?" Ning Que continued scratching his head.

Ma Shi Xiang gave him a severe glance, scolded, "You ****ing dumb ***!! To get into the Academy, countless people are willing to sell their mother and kill their father! Now you only have to take some risk, yet you are not willing to do it! "

After a while the general calmed his breathe, and suggested, "Based on my analysis, Princess should also know that her track was impossible to be kept as a secret. If you could've guessed her identity, and the entire Wei city could have guessed it, then isn't that means her enemies in this country would've guessed that too? Even so she still insisted to get on the journey to the Capital, which means that there are reinforcements waiting on the way. Your mission is simply guide her through the shortcut, so she can get touch with the reinforced people sooner, how is that gambling your life?"

Ning Que looked down, remained silent for a long time, ceaselessly calculating the costs and benefits within this mission.

Ma Shi Xiang stared at his facial expression, remembered this youngster's strange temper, which had irritated him often. He understood

that if he did not take out some tangible profit, it would be really hard to convince him to take the risk, so he involuntarily made a sigh, and whispered, "the Princess had an old man with him. His last name is Lu. I heard that he is part of the North Gate of the Great Sky Way."

After he heard this, Ning Que looked up immediately, his usual calm but lazy eyes suddenly lit up.

Ma Shi Xiang sighed as he looked at him, "You came to Wei City when you were a small child. You earned everyone's favor through your honeyed words and ability. The soldiers of the camp changed year after year, even the restaurant in the east of the city had changed two owners, yet you were still the most favored kid in the Wei City."

He rubbed Ning Que's head, just like looking at a spoiled kid, said, "In that year right before our last general died, he helped you get a military status. Right after the fall, we went to the Great Plain to collect firewood, yet we were besieged by the barbarians and almost died, it's because of you so we could survive. At that time, the entire Wei City's people decided to greatly merit you. We even came up with the idea that, even if your request was to have the most popular prostitute in the Capital for your first night, we would sell whatever we had to raise the money for you."

The general, whose hair was already mostly grey, suddenly switched the thread of the conversation, bitterly said, "Yet no one expected that your request is to Xiu Xing. Unfortunately, we could not help on that at all. Within the entire Wei City, or even the entire Seven City Countryside, we could not help you find a teacher to Xiu Xing. All we could do is watching you reading the Extreme Sense over and over again, but nothing else."

"But now it's your chance!"

Ma Shi Xiang's eyes suddenly became sharp, "No matter the Academy, or that elder, you have to catch both of the opportunities, and you must catch them."

Ning Que stood reticently for a long time, looked down and slightly sighed, "Actually....I just somewhat feel reluctant to leave you guys."

The stars outside of the window were soft and smooth. Ma Shi Xiang glanced at the youngster and said, "Wei City....after all, is too small, you should go to the Capital Chang An, to take a look at the real big world, maybe those places have a lot of danger, but have you ever really scared of anyone? "

"At least...those places won't only have one worn-out Extreme Sense."

Chapter 5: Yearning under the Moonless Night

To the South of Wei city there exists a small stream that can't be counted as a river and a small slope that can't be called a mountain next to the stream. There was a small house that didn't even have a courtyard under the slope. The raining clouds were vanishing early in the night. The bright stars poured their light onto the stream, slope, and house, giving them a beautiful silver glow.

Ning Que walked slowly, dragged his shoes under the star lights. When he saw the house he and Sang Sang lived in, his speed became even slower. But as long as he was walking, no matter how slowly he walked, he will still arrive at his destination. He pushed open the fragile and useless fence, moved towards the door and saw the light emitted by the oil lantern shined through the openings. Ning Que coughed lightly, "What do you think about moving to the capital?"

The door was pushed open and a squeaky noise pierced through the calm and quiet night of the borderline city.

The small maid, Sang Sang, squatted beside the door, her thin figure was elongated by the light of the oil lantern. She pointed at the wooden door and answer, "Didn't you always wanted to go to Chang An? By the way Ning Que, when are you going to steal some oil from the firearm camp? This door has been squeaking for several months now, it's really annoying."

"Who uses those difficult firearm anymore? If you want oil, I will ask the impedimenta camp tomorrow." Ning Que answered instinctively, and suddenly realized, "Wait, I wanted to talk about something else. Besides, if

we really were to leave, why would you care about this broken door?"

Sang Sang stood up, her small body seemed extremely thin in the cool spring breeze. She looked at Ning Que, and said seriously with no other emotions, "Even if we were to leave, there will still be people living in this house, and they are still going to use this door."

After these two leave, will there really be people living in the broken-down remote house? Ning Que thought silently, and a feeling of remorse slipped out of his heart. He sighed lightly and slid through the exit next to Sang Sang, "Start packing at night."

Sang Sang fixed her scattered hair carelessly, looked at his back and said, "Ning Que,

I don't understand why were you so interested in that thing."

"No one can resist the temptation to become stronger. Besides, that thing is pretty important for me."

Ning Que knew that the maid already figured out his true thoughts. He looked at Sang Sang's small but dark face, "You know we can't live in Wei city for our whole life. The world is vast, there are a lot more countries besides the Tang empire. We should go out and explore the world. Even if we talked small, Chang An has much more opportunity than Wei city. We can earn more money and advance faster there. That's why I will get into the Academy for sure."

A knowing expression came onto Sang Sang's face. Since she was still young, her features had yet to extend and mature; the dry climate of Wei city did not help much either. It was hard to call her pretty with her dark,

rough face and her thin, dull hair, maybe not even cute.

But she had a pair of unique eyes. They were long and thin, similar to that of willow's leaves. They were also bright and clear, almost if they were carved out from ice. Since there weren't much emotions shown through her eyes, Sang Sang did not appear to be a poor twelve years old maid, but rather a mature woman who had seen all the struggles and problems in this world. This difference between her actual age and her expressions made her seem cool and unearthly.

Ning Que, on the other hand, knew it was all an illusion. From his point of view, Sang Sang was just a girl who lacked the effort to think. Since these two had been living together for years, she always depended on Ning Que, she started to become too lazy to think by herself. Since she was too lazy to think by herself, she appeared to become stupider by the day. To cover up her stupidity, she started to speak less frequently and used shorter phrases, therefore she appeared to be cool and unearthly.

"No, not stupid, but clumsy." Ning Que thought of something, and correctly himself.

There was a long period of silence. Suddenly, Sang Sang raised her head and bit her lips. She had a fearful expression on her face, which was rather rare to see, "I heard..... Chang An is very big, and there are awful amount of people."

"The capital is grand and sophisticated. Ten years ago the population had passed a million, the rent there is pretty expensive as well. Living in Chang An sure is no easy task." Ning Que signed slightly and saw her nervous expression. Then he smiled, "Don't be afraid of the large mob, you just need to pretend that Chang An is a bigger version of Wei city.

When we get there, I will take care of the business with strangers and you take care of house chores. If you are really scared then just go out less."

"What is the monthly price of food in the capital?" Sang Sang's willow leaf eyes widened and stared at Ning Que. "Will it exceed four silver coins? Then it will be several times higher than Wei city's price."

"If I do get into the Academy, we will need to use some good fabric to make new clothes. Plus guests will come to our house, maybe classmates or something. If any of the teacher think I am worth investing in, then they might come lecture privately. So you need to atleast make a new set of clothing. I estimated we will need to use at least use ten silver coins."

Ning Que answered and wrinkled his eyebrows. But in reality he was just speaking nonsense. He had no idea that ten silver coins was nothing in the eyes of students in the Academy, it may only pay a regular meal in a decent restaurant. Ning Que's situation was quite similar to a famous joke - the farmers were chatting in the field and always thought the queen was making meat buns while the princess was chopping onions. The meat bun was as grand as a sea, and the onion was as tall as a mountain.

But this seemingly underestimation passed the limit of the small maid. She thought for a while and suggested wholeheartedly, "It's too expensive..... Ning Que, is it fine not going to Chang An, and you don't go to the Academy?"

"You have to think about the future!" Ning Que rebuked, "When I graduate from the Academy, I can definitely become an official in the court. At that time even if we use ten silver coins a month, it will be nothing compare to my salary. And what is not good with Chang An? I

just hope there won't be too many makeups in Chen Jin store.

Clearly makeups were a weakness of the little maid. She sank into a deep inner struggle with herself about the decision. After a while she whispered, "But what about the few years that you are attending the Academy? My needlework is nothing compare to the ones in Chang An's market, we may not sustain the high cost!"

"Well, that sure is a problem. I heard you can't hunt in the forests around the capital because they belong to the emperor..... How much money do we have left?"

The master and servant exchanged eye contacts and cooperatively walked to a wooden chest. They opened the chest and took out a nicely locked box. There were many small pieces of silver, clearly they were the savings of the two, but it was not much to count.

Looking at the silver coins in the wooden box, none of the two counted. Sang Sang said quietly, "I counted the night before yesterday, there are 76 silver coins and some small changes."

"It seems like we need to find a way to earn money after moving to Chang An" Ning Que spoke with a determined face.

"Yes, and I will try to improve my needlework by a bit." Sang Sang answered with a determined face.

.....

At night, Sang Sang kneeled to make the bed. She moved rapidly with her skinny knee, and quickly finished organizing the quilts. She then

pushed the middle of the pillow with her small hand, caused it to concave inward, thereby forming an arc which Ning Que can sleep most comfortably. Next, she picked up her own quilts, jumped out of the bed, walked to the room's corner, and started to make her own bed, which was simply put together with two wooden box.

Turning off the light, Ning Que left a bowl on the windowsill. With the help of starlight, he went into the bed. Yawning, he made an extremely comfortable sigh and closed his eyes. After a while, a sound that he has been hearing every night ever since he started living in the Wei City was heard from the corner of the room.

The night seemed to have no difference from every other night in the past years. They would fall asleep alongside the starlights of the Empire's frontier. But in reality, both the master and servant couldn't fall asleep tonight. Maybe because they felt uneasy as they were about to enter a new world or maybe because of Capital Chang An's prosperity and wealth. The two people in the room could hardly calm their breaths down.

A long time had passed, Ning Que opened his two eyes and looked at the window's paper. (in ancient China, window is not made of glass) "I heard that....the girls in Chang An aren't really afraid of coldness. They wear little clothes with collars widely open and their bodies all are very white. Not sure if this is real....I can't remember much, I was too young then. "

He turned over his body, looked toward the dark and gloomy corner, asked, "Sang Sang, do you feel ill recently? Do you feel cold? "

In the darkness, the little maid seems to shake her head. Somewhat it can be seen that she tightly grabbed the quilt, with eyes closed, yet with an extremely rare smile on her face, whispered, "I heard that Chang An's girls have pretty white skins. Everyday they use such good perfumes and lotions, how can they not have pretty skins? "

Ning Que smiled, stared at her and said, "Don't worry, after I earned money later, you can buy any perfumes and lotions you want in the Chen Jin store."

Sang Sang suddenly opened her eyes, her willow leaf-like, long and thin eyes reflected bright star lights, said seriously, "Ning Que, you promised."

"We said before, you need to remember to call me 'master' later on in Chang An, to show that I am respectable."

That year, Ning Que dugged out the sick and cold Sang Sang from a pile of corpses, and they struggled to arrive to the city of Wei. From then it's been seven to eight years. Even though Sang Sang's status was a maid, and she did stuffs that a maid should do, she never called him master. This didn't represent anything but simply a habit.

Today, the little maid Sang Sang was forced to discard this habit.

"Ning Que.....master....You need to remember what you promised, the perfumes and lotions of the Chen Jin store."

Ning Que nodded his head. His sight fell on the snow-like starlight on the side of the bed, for no reason. His heart slightly tightened. He felt the

emptiness he had suffered many years ago. He looked back to the dark night outside of the window and took a glance at the stars. Then looked down and started to long for his homeland. He whispered, "Today there is still no moon...."

Sang Sang, who lied on the wooden boxes of the dark corner, huddled up like a little mice inside the slightly cold quilt. She made an attempt to pull the quilt, in order to ward off the coldness outside. By the way, she tried to smooth the boxes, so the gap between them didn't cause the "bed" to feel as rough. She heard the whispers that came from the window and thought Ning Que....master has began to talk nonsense again.

Chapter 6 Leaving for Chang An, going for a fortune

In the morning, Ning Que and Sang Sang woke up and started to pack up with the light. They occasionally had a quarrel, yet were silent most of the time.

Outside of the house, Ning Que made an attempt to pull something from the house's wall for a while. He pulled out a long bag and took out the arrows in the back. He checked them for a long time and gave them out after he confirmed that there were no problems with the arrow. On the side, Sang Sang took over the arrows and put them into a big pocket made of cotton. She then took out three slightly rusty swords from the top of the fence. Ning Que took over and carefully wiped them. He put the swords facing the sun, looked at their sharp edges, and nodded his head. Eventually he used grass ropes to tie them on his back.

He took out a black umbrella from from the back of the door. Then used the last segment of grass rope to tightly fasten the umbrella on Sang Sang's back. This umbrella was made from unknown materials. It felt like it was covered with a layer of black and dull oil. It does not reflect light, and appears to be somewhat heavy. Moreover, the umbrella was really big. Even though it is closed up and tied to Sang Sang's thin and short body, it almost touched the ground.

After finishing preparation for the journey, Ning Que and Sang Sang walked in tandem, passed through the shabby fence. The two people looked back simultaneously, glancing at the small shabby house, Sang Sang looked up at his lower jaw, asked, "Master, should we lock the door?"

"No need to." Ning Que pondered a bit, said, "Later on....maybe we will hardly come back."

.....

The iron covered wooden wheel rolled over the wet soil ground. The noble's carriage slowly started the departure, moving towards the outside of the Wei City. Five wagons, connected together with soft ropes can grab the attention of people living in the frontier at any time. Actually, many people come to stand by the sidewalks today, yet their focus was not on this noble carriage, but the younger and the little maid sitting on the first wagon. From time to time people would send boiled eggs to them and a red face auntie saying something while using her dirty handkerchief to wipe out her tears.

"Ning Que you the little mean *** hole. My nephew was such a good man, why didn't you let Sang Sang marry him? Now it's all over, this poor little girl has to follow you to a place where people eat others without even spitting their bones. I am telling you, you better take care of my Sang Sang!"

On the carriage, Ning Que's face turned extremely awkward, answered irritatedly, "Auntie, you started to propose for a marriage since Sang Sang was eight, this thing was just not going to work out that way."

After several kindly scoldings from the auntie, raindrops began to fall off from the top of the sky. The rain seemed to be thinner than lines, falling on people's body, bringing them a slight sense of coldness. However, none of the people left. The soldiers' relatives in Wei City were busy at saying good byes to Ning Que, and calculating the last debt issues with him. It seems like the crowd would make the noises for a really

long time.

In the most noble and luxurious wagon in the back, that arrogant and cold maid opened the curtain. She leaned out her head and took a glance. Her pretty eyebrow can't help but frown.

When the carriage was about to moved out of this small city in the frontier, Ning Que stood up from the wagon, made a salute to the people.

The youngster carried three old swords on his back. Standing in the water with one hand making a fist and placing it under the other one, he made a grateful salute and showed some heroic manner.

"Brothers and uncles, sisters and aunties, I don't want to say much thankful words."

After finishing this sentence, he opened up his two arms in the rain. He clenched his fists and extended them up, revealing his pectoralis and biceps that were not so strong. He made a really stupid pose, and shouted loudly, "This trip to Chang An, if I don't make a fortune out of myself, I will never come back!"

Ning Que's words came out, like the story reciters' wood dropping down the table, (TL Note: the story reciters used to signal the starting of their story), or even like a bloody human head falling down the ground, causing the people on the sidewalk to applaud cheerfully altogether.

In the only good restaurant in Wei City, Ma Shi Xiang and his several

military officials were drinking wine. The nobles did not want them to send off and they were also too lazy to send off Ning Que. Tet they clearly saw the image of this moment. One official thought about what Ning Que said on the wagon and couldn't help but sighed, "Won't be back if not making a fortune? Then this unfortunate kid will probably never come back."

Ma Shi Xiang, who was sitting on a side of the table, pondered about the three concise sentences Ning Que told him last night and can't help but lightly touch his beard. He felt comforted looking at the carriage that was gradually passing out of the gate and laughed."May as well never come back you little troublemaker. Bring the mess to the world outside!"

The carriage traveled away from Wei city and the Great Plain. The troublesome dry season that bothered the barbarian tribes and the new chief did not affect the weather here. The spring breeze colored the leaves and grass a new lively color which painted the wagon wheels and horseshoes. Butterflies were swirling around in the air playfully.

The steeds were running between the grass field and the hills. Sometimes the chains linking them to the carriage were pulled intensively and sometimes they were simply left hanging. Once in a while the carpet-filled fancy carriage room jumped due to obstacles and rocks. The beautiful maid stared blankly into the view; her expression was little stiff, maybe she had a flashback to the dusty northern climate. However, in her eyes there was definitely passion and desire of the unknown future.

There was a little boy dressed in luxurious clothing in the carriage. He was hugging the maid's leg and looking at her desperately, mumbling some words, perhaps wanting to go out and play.

The maid turned around and lectured him harshly, but her expression turned soft and took him into her arms and rubbed his head.

The wind blew one corner of the curtain open, the breeze slide past the face of the maid. She squinted her eyes toward the front of the entire group, targeting her negative expression at someone.

In the frontmost simple carriage sat the young soldier named Ning Que. From his repetitive nodding it was easy to see that he was almost asleep. However he was supposed to be the guide who directed the entire party to the right routes, therefore it was hard to call him qualified or responsible.

But the reason for the maid's cold expression was not exactly Ning Que's dereliction of his duty, but rather another action that she observed.

While Ning Que was napping on the carriage and while the carriage was moving quickly, he almost fell off couple of times. The only reason that he was still on the cart was that Sang Sang used her small and weak body to support Ning Que's weight and kept him on board. Although it was hard to see the expression on her dark face, it was noticeable that she was very tired and struggling.

Right at this moment, the group ran pass a shallow dent in the grassland. Ning Que woke up from the shock and rubbed his eyes while looking at the sky. He noticed that he slept right until the dusk and raised

his hand to signal the party to rest. The group stopped and started to set up their camps.

Setting up camps right after waking up seemed irresponsible and unprofessional, but no one objected to his command.

It's been several days after they left Wei city. Every order the youngster gave on the trip was proven to be correct; whether it was the choice of route, location of camps, safety protection, intake of resource, or securing escape, there was no flaws in his plans. The speed of the party was rather fast regardless of all the preparation as well.

The dozen of barbarian bandits that the noble took in did not trust and looked down upon the soldiers of Wei city at first, but now they have nothing but respect for the young guide's extraordinary abilities.

Along the river, people silently dug and set up fire to boil water. The maid left the fancy and well-guarded carriage and glanced at Ning Que who was comfortably rubbing his stomach and ready to eat dinner. Seeing the small maid who was struggling to transport the water into the pot and making a fire out of wood beside Ning Que, the noble maid's eyebrows wrinkled really hard.

A strong and tall guard stood up and looked at the maid. She shook her head to signal no need to follow, and walked towards Ning Que's camp.

She acknowledged that the youngster was rather capable, much better than the self-centered noble sons in Chang An at least. If he was a noble son in Chang An, then she would have treated his attitude with recognition. But he was just a teen from the lower class, and he

oppressed the young girl who he should've supported and helped. This view touched and affected her mood. The made her feel rather unpleasant.

Walked toward the small maid Sang Sang, the noble maid smiled at her warmly and signaled her to put down the bulky wood and talked to her.

Sang Sang peek at Ning Que, waited for his approval then walked towards her. The maid took out and offered a handkerchief, but Sang Sang shook her head - after all the physical activities, there was no sweat on the small maid's forehead.

Finally Ning Que got up from the grass and dusted off the dirt and saluted while smiling at the maid.

The maid did not turn around to look at him, she said indifferently, "I don't like you, therefore there is no reason for you to salute me. It is hateful to see people like you that act cheerful and warm on the outside while are truly corrupt and degenerate in their hearts."

The monotone words and tilted chin expressed her noble status. As a personal maid serving the princess of Tang empire, she can treat most of the court officials equally - but small characters like Ning Que? even more so.

Ning Que shook his head and laughed, turned around and walked towards the campfire near the river.

He only has one maid while the noble has countless servants. The only

maid was pulled away by one of the countless servant to chat. Although the noble has other maids serving her, Ning Que has to prepare and cook himself.

Perhaps his face skin turned thick due to constant dust storms on the borderline, there was awkwardness in Ning Que's laughter.

After sunset, Sang Sang returned with a bunch of snacks. Ning Que was disappointingly looking at the over cooked meat gruel while she walked in. He did not hesitate and took the snacks and binged on them while asking, "Why does she want to chat with you so much? I haven't eat a single actual meal in days..... sometimes these noble's sympathy is truly misplaced. Just watch her smile, looking like the wolf who wanted to eat the Red Riding Hood, thinking she is welcoming and soft, but she actually is as fake as the water-filled alcohol in Wei city."

"She is not a bad person," Sang Sang gathered the overcooked food and was about to clean up and leave, but Ning Que called her back.

"What did you guys talked about these few days?" Ning Que asked.

Sang Sang thought for a long time trying to memorize what happened and answered, "I think.... you know I don't like to talk.... Most of the time she was talking about things happened on the Great Plain, but I forgot what exactly she said."

After hearing this, Ning Que felt much better. While he was humming a

light tone and chewing on the snacks he said, "Next time when she wants to chat with you, remember to charge her, or you can take some more of these snacks."

At night

Sang Sang used the river water and extinguished the campfire. After making sure the fire was gone, she carefully pulled a barrel filled with hot water towards the small camp. The people on the river bank saw this view and knew the small maid was preparing water to wash Ning Que's feet, many of them showed disdainful expressions.

And of course, this disdainful expression's target was Ning Que.

After washing his feet, Ning Que slid into the lamb fur blanket, and put a pair of cold feet into his arms. He let out a moan and yawned, "Let's sleep."

Sang Sang was much more tired than he was, and soon fell asleep.

But Ning Que opened his eyes again, his sight seemed to pierce through the old and shabby camp and landed on the starry sky, then his eyes fell upon a handkerchief.

Remembering the gold-laced handkerchief that the maid took out, he knew his prediction was right, but he did not know what use he can make out of the prediction.

Chapter 7 Drink at night, dream a sea

Looking at the top of the camp, Ning Que thought about the tiny details after leaving the Wei city.

In the entire trip that luxurious wagon's curtain was tightly closed. No one exited except a boy, who obviously had barbarian bloodline, would occasionally get out of the wagon and play for a while. There was no chance to see the Princess. There was only that pretty and arrogant maid giving out commands from time to time.

For unknown reasons, the maid really loved to call Sang Sang over to have a chat.

Also, for unknown reasons, the maid did not hide her disgust toward Ning Que at all.

Ning Que thought she was a really good actor. Whether in Wei City, on the journey, the attitude of those Great Plain subordinates, or from her own temperament, it was really hard to tell that she was not a maid.

This was the point that made him confused. He had always been thinking that the real Tang Empire upper class nobles would not have too much sympathy towards Sang Sang.

Yet these were not the things he was really concerned with. In these days he had constantly kept an eye on an elder wearing an old robe inside the wagon. If his predictions were right, this kind elder should be the Xiu Xing expert in the North Gate of Holy Sky Way, as mentioned by

General Ma.

Since he was small, Ning Que had been determined to step into that mysterious world of Xiu Xing yet he could not even feel the entry to it. The only reason why he was willing to follow this group to return to the Capital was because this group has a real Xiu Xingist.

Unfortunately, he still had not found a chance to talk with the elder, who was being highly protected. Only during dining time, could he occasionally make eye contact with the elder. On that moment, he felt like he could see the kindnesses and encourages from the elder's eye, which caused him to think so much yet without getting an answer.

After having thought and analyzed the situation for so long but he still remaining confused. Ning Que gathered his mind. Then he realized that the pair of small feet in his arms was not warm yet and was still as freezing as ice. Even causing his own chest to feel cold. Involuntarily, he frowned.

The little maid Sang Sang had suffered too much when she was little. She was covered with corpses on the road. After picking up by Ning Que, she soon got really sick and she did not recover for many months.

He had taken her to the military surgeons in the Wei City and he even had taken her to the far away Kai Ping City. Yet all the doctors came up with the same diagnosis: her body was weak in nature, and therefore innately cold.

Because of her innately cold body, Sang Sang would rarely sweat, which means that metabolism doesn't function well in her system. The daily

toxins produced by her body could not be excreted out normally, so day by day the stacking of toxins caused Sang Sang to become really weak. Therefore, Ning Que listened to doctor's words, let Sang Sang do massive movements daily, in order to improve her cold body. This is also why in other people's eyes, he always treated Sang Sang like a horse by giving her lots of work.

Even though she worked hard everyday, it didn't always seem to help raise the temperature of Sang Sang's body. Such as now, her body was still as cold as rocks that could make up an ice house.

Ning Que got up and rubbed his almost frozen stomach. He pulled out a cow feathered wine bag from a corner and woke Sang Sang up. He then place the wine bag near her lip.

Sang Sang, still in a daze, slowly opened up her eyes. She naturally took the wine bag and started to drink the wine within. Although the wine didn't spill even a single drop, there was already a strong and spicy scent in the night. What she was drinking seemed to be the strong wine on the Great Plain.

The short and skinny little maid held a big wine bag and drank drastically. It was known that two bowls of this type of wine could cause a strong adult to fall asleep instantaneously. However, she already drank a little less than half of a bag, until her belly became slightly swollen. This picture could hardly be described as manly, but rather somewhat weird.

She wiped her mouth. Willow-like eyes appeared to be bright and she looked like she didn't even drink any. She gave Ning Que a smile, then lied down and went to sleep again.

The entire room was filled with wine's scent. The pair of cold foot in his arms gradually became warm. Ning Que looked at the sweats on her nose and finally felt relieved. He wiped out the sweats on his own head.

He tightly wrapped the sheep wool-made quilt towards their bodies. Ning Que slowly closed his eyes. The worn-out scroll of "Extreme Sense" was placed near his face. Every night before sleep, he would read for a few pages. Even if he didn't read, he would still recite it once inside his head. This is a habit formed over many years.

"Pray that all life to escape the pain of aging and death, every poison to not harm them. "

"Pray that all life escape disease and disaster, protect its essence, marching bravely into the way of Wisdom.

In the shallow sleep, his spirit, alongside the words on the scroll, alongside the seemingly simple yet confusing way of sensation. slowly began to Xiu Xing.

Gradually, the wool-made quilt that covered him and Sang Sang's body disappeared. The little shabby camp disappeared. The green grasses outside of the tribe disappeared and the brook also transformed into white fog that then became nothing. The whole world became a space involving only Ning Que and Sang Sang. Yet in this space, they were breathing in a mysterious pattern. The breaths in this world slowing liquefied and became an ocean that surrounded the two figures with warmth.

This mysterious feeling was not strange to Ning Que. For many years after he started reading the Extreme Sense, he would often sense it before he went to sleep. Yet he knew a sad fact, this was not the actual sense he had after meditation, but simply a dream.

The warm sea, probably was only a false sensation in the dream because the pair of small feet in his arms were gradually heating up, but this was also an extremely pretty false sense.

As comforted himself, Ning Que went into a deeper level of sleep. It was another sweet night of no dream.

Ning Que woke up the next morning. Although he had a quality sleep, his expression revealed his desire to sleep another three days and three nights.

"Why are we changing our route without previous preparation?" Ning Que looked at the maid, trying to conceal his rage and said softly, "My plan of getting through Mt. Min and traveling straight to the Hua Xi road have no errors."

But no one in the camp answered his question, including the maid.

"I'm the guide, and you guys are not familiar with Mt. Min," Ning Que looked at the maid, stayed silent for a moment and spoke again, "I know you guys are afraid of getting ambushed, but if you listen to me, I can

guarantee you that there will be no danger ahead of us."

The maid looked back at him, almost like looking at a rock. Her expression was clear, Ning Que has no right for her to explain the decision.

Returning to his camp, Ning Que found Sang Sang, who is packing the camp and items. "After I sent them into their route, we need to leave as soon as possible."

Holding a simple handmade map, Ning Que pointed at a place and explained, "The farthest we can get to is this location, after this point, the enemy only need to send a few teams of troops and this group will be eliminated."

"You should explain to them." Sang Sang raised her head and said.

"I'm guessing that there will be people aiding the princess's party, therefore they will not listen to me." Ning Que answer, "Convincing a group of people as stupid as pigs isn't my strength."

Sang Sang did not speak, but rather used her eyes' expression to ask, "If there are people aiding them there, why are you still so worried, and wants to leave midway?"

"My instinct tells me there will be trouble ahead" Ning Que answered, "Because I believe the daring character who wants to assassinate the fourth princess of Tang empire won't be as stupid as that woman and not prepare a few backup plans."

Sang Sang wanted to say something but held it back, instead she advised, "You.....should talk more politely about her."

"I know her true identity," Ning Que raised his eyebrows and mocked, "So what if she is the princess? I said it in Wei city, she is an idiotic princess."

Chapter 8 On the way of north mountain, an arrow flew from the south

"Even for finding people to back up, the choice of place was also really important, if it were for me to decide, I would rather let the reinforcement be place to be on some road, instead of Pine Cone Hill."

Ning Que looked at the marked point on the hand-drawn map. "They chose to go from the north mountain, yet forgot to think that even though this is a single road, the two sides of the road are covered by forest, which is easy for ambush."

After finish this sentence, he remained silent for a while. He put the hand-drawn map into his clothes and shook his hand. He sneered at himself, "The so called 'guide,' besides leading them into the way of north mountain, was more of a target to confuse the enemies by grabbing their attention. That stupid princess had not trusted General Ma at all, and therefore she won't trust me either."

"One idiot is leading a group of idiots." Ning Que thought about the possible incoming ambush on the way of north mountain, the possible nonexistence of the reinforcement troop, his feeling became heavier and lost. He lowered his voice and said harshly, "Stayed about a year on the Great Plain, yet still did not become any smarter, I don't understand where did she get her reputation from."

"Kang!" Ning Que took out the three slightly rusty swords and opened up a water bag. He poured water on the grindstone and began to grind silently. After entering the path of north mountain, there may be several continuous fights. While it's too late to grind right before the fights, he could at least calm himself down by doing so.

"If we separate from them as soon as we entered the way of north mountain, how can you get any chance to ask that elder?" Sang Sang asked.

"Staying alive is the most important thing." Ning Que looked down to grind his knife, slowly but determinedly, "As long as we can arrive Chang An alive, we can always find opportunities to learn those things. Yet if we left our lives in the hands of that group of idiots, we won't have any more chances."

.....

The more they went South, the higher the temperature rose. In theory the landscape outside was supposed to become fresher, But because this group went onto the higher altitudes of Mian Mountain, the green grasses around the carriage lessened little by little becoming tall trees on the sides. The leaves were not yet green, keeping the sternness from last year's fall and winter.

As the temperature lowered, a tense and depressive aura covered the entire carriage. Everyone understood, the big figure in Chang An who dared to plot to murder the princess, if he wanted to prevent the princess from peacefully returning to the Capital, the Mian Mountain between the frontier and the inner provinces would be his last chance.

During the tense caution and search, the carriage traveled for days and eventually arrived at the entry of the path of the north mountain. Looking at the gloomy dense forest, most people in the team did not feel worried like Ning Que did, but became much more relieved.

That pretty maid had chat with Sang Sang for much less time in these days. Most of the time she remained on the second wagon. When she got off in the evening, she even had a little smile.

When she decided to leave the Great Plain, she had already sent messengers into the territory of the empire. Although it was difficult to gather a large army to escort the princess home, the messenger had enough time to contact some loyal subordinates of the princess.

Ten days ago when she received the emergency report from Gu Shan state, she did not hesitate for a moment and went straight into the North Mountain road. Her determination was cause by her trust in the young commandery of the Gu Shan state. She believed that he already lead his troops into the south opening of the North Mountain.

Although she left Tang empire for a year already, but she still believe that her subordinates were still loyal to her. Some people might be bribed by that woman in the Royal Palace and turned against her, but Hua Shan Yue definitely would not, because.....his eyes were always so gentle when looking at her.

When the group was thirty miles from the meeting point, it started to set up camps and rest in the dusk. Traveling through the forest in midnight seemed like a risky choice from all angles. Some guards even suggested her to wait outside of North Mountain and wait for Hua Shan Yue's troop to aid the party.

As for this suggestion, she was still thinking. But whatever the situation, she and the child were very safe for now, gentle smiles once again

crawled back onto her soft cheeks. Happiness once again seemed to return to the entire carriage.

In the light of dusk, a simple camp was set right outside of the circular formation of the carriage. The guards asked one time, but the owner of camp stayed there and just wouldn't join the formation created by the five carriages and supply carts.

"If we don't set the camp further away from the formation, how are we going to run away when emergencies happen?" Ning Que explained, he tied the big black umbrella up with grass string and made a pretty flower knot, then put it on Sang Sang's back.

Sang Sang raised her head, looking at his chin with a hint of mustache and asked, "If we ran away, what are they going to do?"

Ning Que was checking if the bowstrings were damped. When he heard the question, he turned around and looked at the little dark face of the maid. After a period of silence he said earnestly, "You might have forgotten what happened when you were young, but I did not."

"I dug you out of a corpse pile. Since I survived when I was young, I endured some struggles that normal people would not even imagine."

"Sang Sang, you should always remember that we struggled really, really hard..... even gambled our lives to stay alive in this world. If we struggle so much to live, then we should not die so easily."

After saying this sentence, Ning Que did not explain any further. He put

the freshly sharpened swords into their sheaths, used some grass string to wrap around them and coordinated the sheaths to a perfect distance, then put them onto his back.

Sang Sang did not ask any further and started packing silently. She used her small hands to test the straightness of each arrows. Because she know when darkness of night fell upon the earth, it will be the moment she and Ning Que would ran off into the vast and open Mt. Min. She was not afraid, because when she was younger, they had traveled through the mountain and forest countless times during the night.

Right at this moment, the hand of Ning Que that was holding the sheaths stiffened.

The curtain of the simple camp was lifted by a single hand. The maid walked in, but the smile on her delicate face turned into frozen ice.

Her original purpose was to come chat with Sang Sang, but she did not expect to see the two packing their belongings. It was easy to guess that they wanted to leave.

"What are you guys doing?" She stared coldly at Ning Que's face and said, "At a time like this, your action is hard to not be considered as suspicious."

Ning Que did not speak a word at first, but smiled a moment later. He was ready to explain. Suddenly his ears moved a little, the dimples on his face disappeared and his expression became heavy and serious. Quickly he carried the three swords onto his back and pushed the maid aside unpolitely and walked out the camp.

The camps were located right outside of the opening into North Mountain. There was no dense forest covering them. The formation was comfortably warm and showered under the last light of dusk. But at this moment the light seemed to turn to a layer of crimson red.

The wind traveled through the newly awakened forest and whistled lowly, almost like crying of ghosts. Ning Que wrinkled his eyebrows and observed the depths of the forest closely. He listened to the details of the whistles carefully, and suddenly yelled, "Ambush!"

The silent noise in the low-pitched whistle of the wind finally showed its true identity. An arrow shot from the forest and flew straight into the fancy carriage like a thunder strike!

Chapter 9 The determined soldiers

"Pu!"

Like a sharp metal spine stabbed hard into several dozens of wet paper, the arrow pierced into the chest of one guard who stood by the noble wagon. The young man fell down as he covered his bleeding chest with his hand.

During the moment Ning Que called out "Ambush," the well trained guard reacted immediately. He bravely jumped on top of the wagon, blocking the window of the princess's carriage. He did not know where the arrow would go but he only knew that the princess inside the wagon must be the enemies' first target. He could not let anyone threaten princess's life.

This brave guard took the right gamble, yet the cost was his young life.

"Ambush!"

"Protect the highness!"

"Shields up!"

The guards started to yell both angrily and surprisingly.

Countless arrows were shot out like a storm from the forest. "So-- So--," the arrows instantly shouted through the wind and appeared to be extremely terrifying.

Ning Que was still a short distance away from the circular carriage formation. He lied down immediately. He did not forget to cover Sang Sang and the maid by using his body as he fell down.

He fell on the ground between the trees. Because of the pine needles stacked on the way of the north mountain, he did not feel much pain. He kept his face glued to the cold leaves. He listened to the arrows that were densely packed break the air in the front. As he heard the arrows occasionally fly over his head, he silently calculating the number of archers and the arrows used.

The entry to the path of north mountain was surrounded by the guards' angry and anxious shouts yelling commands and lifting the heavy shields. The guards pushed the big shields that were temporarily made out of panels of the wagons into the edges of the carriage to use as a shield to block against the arrows.

Chu! Chu! Chu! Chu!

Arrows landed harshly into the simple wooden shields, sounding like hits on a battle drum. Yet they were much more intensive and terrifying than the battle drums. From time to time, there were arrows that passed through the joint between the shields and pierced the guards, causing a stuffy hum. However, the horses who were unfortunately hit by the arrows were not as determined as Tang's men. They painfully fell down and started to roll and rage.

The sound of arrows breaking the air, arrows hitting the wooden shields, humans' stuffy hum, and horses' sad rage mixed together transforming the previous happy and warm camp into a hell.

Chiu!

One arrow landed deep into the soil ground in front of Ning Que causing the rocks to fly at his face immediately making a red mark. Yet his facial expression had not even changed a tiny bit. He silently lied on the pine needles and looked through the gaps between the trees. He passed over that arrow, far away to the south of the way of North Mountain.

The opponents did not choose to ambush in the jungle surrounding the path to North Mountain and ambush during the night. But chose to attack during evening, when the carriage just arrived to the path of the North Mountain. Even though Ning Que had a natural instinct towards danger since childhood, he still did not think of it.

Evening was the time people loosening their guards the most. Moreover, since the carriage would almost meet with the reinforced people from Gu Mountain Province. it's almost unavoidable that people would feel relieved. The enemies used this simple point to their advantage.

Faintly people could already see the densely juxtaposed bodies appearing from the jungle on the two sides of the path of the North Mountain. Through the previous calculation by using the density between the arrows and the number of people he saw, he could approximately predict that there were around sixty enemies.

After all it was in Tang, and the target was the Emperor's favorite princess. No matter for secrecy before or after the murder, the opponent could not really use any big troop, instead they could only choose the most loyal assassins who were willing to sacrifice their lives.

Since they were assassins, the number could not be too big. However, Ning Que clearly understood, on the battlefield, it's never the number that matters. Instead, a group of assassins who were not afraid of death was the hardest to deal with.

The one who planned out this murder, besides using assassins, might even ask a Xiu Xingist to join. He thought of the possible fight between those experts. Ning Que actually felt excited, but suddenly all of his excitations turned into fear that he had never encountered before.

"So unfortunate." He muttered, turning his head to glance at the maid on his side, discovering that this little woman only had felt terrified at the beginning, yet calmed herself down quickly. He couldn't help but applaud in his heart.

The enemies from the two sides in the jungle had already ran out. The men who was wearing the gray Tang's military uniforms did not cover their faces. They waved their steel knife as they ran in like wolves. Since they did not hide their identities, then obviously one side would be completely slaughtered.

The wild barbarians surrounding the carriage were the horse gang subdued by the princess on the Great Plain. The previous rain of arrows already stimulated their ferocity. Some people took out their bows and

arrows and began shooting, some people shouted as they took out their knives and ran towards the enemies.

Suddenly, the sound of contacts between weapons exploded out on the way of North Mountain. From time to time there were people dying. The points of the knives were stabbed into chests and bellies, and the edges of the knives were cutting the throats apart. Bloods came out from the men's bodies, soaking and incinerating the fallen leaves on the ground.

The battle went into the most horrifying stage since the beginning, yet no one retreated, and no one turned around. What they competed on was not only their skills, but more of their courage and warlike spirit.

Those barbarians from the Great Plain were really skilled at archery. They were brave and determined, instantly suppressed the enemies' attack. From time to time people died in the jungle. The barbarians shouted out weird sounds as they went into the battle, gradually taking over the control of the ground around the carriage formation. Moreover, they were courageous yet they did not lose their caution. They did not extend the battlefield for no reason.

No matter how it was observed, the tactic used by the barbarian guards was correct, at least it was right in Ning Que's opinion. Therefore he was confused, why was the expression of the maid becoming more and more depressed, it seemed like she was worried about something.

She was worried that the barbarian guards did not experience the dreadful battles in Central Region. She gritted her teeth forcefully, and decided to stand up.

But Ning Que would not simply let her show their location and lead Sang Sang and himself into a dangerous situation. The maid fell down after he made a fist with his hand and hit the curve between her leg.

“What are you doing!” The maid started angrily into his eyes, her right hand was slowly reaching for her waist.

Ning Que was focusing on the battlefield and did not pay attention to her questioning. When he noticed the formation around the carriage, he thought of a certain possibility and his body shivered.

The fight in the opening of the North Mountain was awful, but in the formation it was strangely quiet. The dozen elite Tang guards kneeled halfway and surrounded the two carriages.

Inside of the flawless protection of the guards, the gentle elder in the old robe closed his eyes and sat in front of one of the carriages, his face was in the direction of the depth of the forest.

Ning Que nervously licked his lips and reached for Sang Sang. His palm was wet because a lot of sweat was produced from his tense mood.

Sang Sang glanced and passed him the bow in her hands, then she slowly untie the black umbrella behind her back, quietly put it on the fallen leaves along her side.

The fight raged on, the three were separated from the dangerous battlefield by the carriage formation. Looking at the violent encounter

between the barbarian soldiers and the assassins, Ning Que knew the impact would not affect their location any time soon. However, he felt nervous, so nervous that he did not notice the sweat between his palm and the bowstring had vaporized.

The dozen statue like guards kneeled halfway around the carriage, all of them stared coldly into the depths of the dense forest. The expressions on their tanned face could be described as calm and persevering, although alarmed but not afraid.

These dozen Tang guards came from Chang An Yu Lin army. They were especially chosen to protect the fourth princess when she was married into the Great Plain. For sure they were the best of the elites in the army, however, in this battle their performance was rather weird.

When the rain of arrows ambushed them from the depths of the forest, the guards quickly formed a circular guarding formation, and stayed behind their huge shield without further actions. Even until the enemy assassins showed up and started attacking, they stayed in this position, almost if they were unaware of their surroundings.

Sometimes their ally barbarian soldiers die in front of them, sometimes lifeless bodies crashed into the carriage and produced a loud bang. They did not even move their eyelashes, still staring coldly into the depth of the forest. Their body and mind were like unmovable steels and stones.

The guards kneeled on the fallen leaves with one knee. They were wearing cotton shirts, and the edges of the shirts showed hints of iron scale. Their right hands reached for their back, holding the knife shanks tightly and focused on their frontal view, surrounding the two carriages behind them.

One of the fancy carriage remained silent. In the other carriage sat the only elder in the entire group. His eyes were closed and he sat crossed-legs, seemed very comfortable. On his knees there laid a sword, the sword shank was old and broken, just like the robe the elder was wearing.

The guards remained emotionless around the elder's carriage. They did not pay attention to the surrounding battle, nor the screams and shouts around them. Only when the enemy was about to rush into their defense formation, then one of the guard will take out their knife and kill the assassin.

Since only one of the guards entered the battle, he was outnumbered by the large mob of assassins and quickly showed signs of danger. But even this did not move the rest of the guards, they still would not leave the elder for even half a step.

Ning Que did not know why the guards were behaving this way, he did not know what was hiding in the depths of the dense forest, but he knew for sure there will be big trouble.

Knowing vaguely of what was going to happen and the exciting new world he was about to enter, Ning Que became even more tense. His index and middle finger kept rubbing the bowstring silently. After brief moment, his breathing magically slowed down, his expression turned steady.

The mood became oppressive from waiting for the unknown danger. The shouts and knife clashes surrounding the carriages seemed to disappear in that moment.

In that critical and intense moment, the fancy carriage's window was pushed open. A beautiful young lady stuck out her head, her facial expression was full of worry.

The leader of the guards did not wait for her to say anything, he warned her and quickly pushed her back into the carriage and closed the window. Although his expression showed respect, his action was quite impolite due to the fatal situation they are in.

Chapter 10 A sword placed in front of the knee, a sword passed through the blood

“Victims of the Big Figures....”

While Ning Que looked at this scene and thought silently, he felt a gaze to the side of him. When he turned, he saw Sang Sang look at him quietly in the face.

They looked at each other for one or two seconds, a brief moment but it felt like time had slowed down and felt like an eternity.

Once again, Ning Que lost to his little maid. He couldn't help but make a sigh and slightly tightened up the muscle on his legs. He tiptoed through the fallen trees, into the wet soil, and prepared to go into the battle.

Far away, the path of the North Mountain became gloomier as the sun fell. Between the black branches, a big wind suddenly blew up from nowhere. The newly born branches, hidden under the old bark's protection, did not get harmed, but the fallen leaves on the ground were being blew up into the air, making a sound, then slowly fell down.

In the spring time, countless (a line of poetry, don't know how to translate)

One stalwart man, wearing a dark colored light armor, appeared on the path of the North Mountain. As he made a shout as loud as thunder, his armor gave out a light green glow. It shined for a moment then

disappeared, like the God's occasional glance from the sky.

He lifted his two big arms, and threw a heavy rock, like shooting a cannonball, toward that luxurious wagon!

Such terrifying power that could even turned a person into a long range Catapult!

The heavy stone broke the air and came with a high speed, destroying all the branches it encountered. Along a projectile, it unstoppably traveled over a hundred meter, precisely hitting on the first wagon!

Along with a muffle, the luxurious yet firm wagon suddenly collapsed apart. People could faintly see broken arms and blood inside.

The Tang's guards, who had been held their knife and stayed in the periphery of the wagon since the very beginning, still kept their cold and indifferent faces. It seems that they couldn't see the wagon behind them already became fragments, and it seems that the princess they would fight till death already got smashed into pieces. They did not even look surprised. Instead, they faintly seemed to feel relieved and calm.

"Line up in the front, shoot!"

The head of the guards gave out the command.

Three subordinates kept their half-kneeled form, let go of their right hand's hilt, and placed the powerful military bolt horizontally in front of them. They targeted the deeper portion of the jungle and rapidly pulled

the trigger.

Like lightning, nine bolts passed through the slowly fallen leaves, accurately shooting on that godlike man. Yet that stalwart man simply waved his hand, whisked off the two aimed on his face, and gave no care towards the ones that aimed on his chest.

Because of the high speed of the bolts, after defending them with his bare hands the stone like man's hands were only slightly shaking. The bolts on his chest only went through the armor . Like a bug that could not stay still, the arrows quivered twice then fell on the ground. The arrows had a small hint of blood on them. The man probably had a minor wound.

Because the distance was too far, the wave of bolts did not do any other impact besides the small hint of blood. The head of the guards already had thought of this. His facial expression did not change at all. He looked towards that stalwart man, raised his right hand, said, "Stay!"

Three guards put down the bolts and held their knives with their right hands again.

.....

Because of Sang Sang, Ning Que was planing to find an opportunity to save the poor scapegoat inside the wagon. But the situation of the battle changed too fast. He could not even react fast enough. That godlike man suddenly appeared in people's sight and then the heavy stone flew across the air. Immediately without delay, the luxurious wagon and the woman inside were all crushed..

Was Ning Que feeling pity for the substitute or ashamed that he had betrayed Sang Sang's trust? No matter for what reason, at the moment he looked at the man on the way of North Mountain, he seemed angry.

From using one mystic method of Xiu Xing, that big man obtained such unbelievable power. However, throwing such a heavy rock for a such long distance still costed him a lot. His face was now red, sweats came out of the armor through the holes made by the arrows, and his legs were slightly shaking. Unexpectedly, he seemed to exhibit a sign of passing out.

For unknown reasons, facing such a good opportunity, the guards did not choose to attack, yet still cautiously stayed at the periphery of the second wagon.

The elder, sat on this wagon, with his eyes still closed.

Suddenly, the elder's white hair moved. Between his knees, a horizontally placed old sword began to hum. The sword within the sheath constantly colliding with the inner layer, seems like it can't wait to get out and seek for blood.

Weng....WengWeng!

Ceng!

A clear and melodious sing!

The sword autonomously flew out of the sheath, transforming into a green light, noiselessly stabbed into that godlike body!

.....

On the entry of the path of the North Mountain, during the last light of the day, it seemed like there was an invisible mirror as the sword flew out of the sheath from the elder's knee. It transforming into a light. At the same time, a sword faintly visible passed through the air in the form of a grey shadow from the forest!

Like lightning, the sword was mixed in with the fallen leaves and was unnoticeable. The next second it flew across the air with the speed of lightning outside of the path of the North Mountain. The low and deep hum from the very beginning transformed into a thunderous roar before one could even make a blink.

The grey shadow's speed was strangely fast. The power and influence brought along with it shattered all the leaves instantaneously. The fragmented leaves behind the shadow formed a straight line. At the end of the line, it was none other than the elder whose sword had already flew out of the sheath. The grey shadow flew straight through the air toward the elder!

"Great Sword Master!"

Feeling the unstoppable momentum of the gray shadow, the statue-like guards that were calmly waiting for their command finally changed their expressions. Some of them were shouting to warn the formation. When the elder, the strongest out of the group, finally decided to enter the

fight, his sword slid off its old shank and pointed straight at the huge man in the depths of the forest.

When the enemy appeared, it felt like thunder and wind came with him.

To assassinate the princess in the territory of the empire, the enemy sent out two uncommon xiuxingist. One of them was a Great Sword Master! Although the group was terrified in this crisis, the guards still did not show a sign of fear. The only expression on their faces was determination, and the leader of the guards yelled loudly, "Kill!"

Multiple knives were taken out of its shanks, more than ten sharp steel blades slashed towards the empty space in front of the guards with resolution of no return. The guards breathed heavily and continued slashing.

Every slash cut through the air and the imaginary hill, every one of them were forceful and determined. These slashes webbed out a blade net and protected the elder without the sword.

The fast moving gray shadow arrived in front of the blade net.(Blade Net is like a formation formed by the guards.) Right before it was going to be chopped down by the sharp blades, it stopped in midair strangely and dodged to the side magically avoiding the dense blade formation and flew away.

The moment it appeared in the dense wood, the gray shadow had already formed the unstoppable force of thunder and wind. However to everyone's surprise, when it entered the battle the gray shadow was actually using momentum of agile and nimble.

When the gray shadow flew away, its speed slowed down rapidly. Its true form was finally seemed. It was a thin and dull sword, so light it could be blown away by a weak wind.

A simple thin and dull sword, as light as a piece of paper, was moving so strangely it was like a ghost attacking the group. Its path was hard to predict and when it flew away, the sword touched one of the guards' lower neck, leaving behind a small trace of blood line.

Right after the thin trace of blood line appeared, it expanded. Blood started to pour out with raging speed. This guard was holding his knife in his right hand, and his neck with his left. The blood overflowed through his fingers and his eyes were staring angrily into the dense forest. He then fell down slowly, but until his death he still did not see the powerful great sword master.

The gray sword shadow drew a curve in the air and came back in front of the knife formation with the speed of lighting. Sometimes it was in front, sometimes it was to the back. Its path was unpredictable and uncatchable. Few moments later, another two guards were slain.

Blood drops were flying in the air, but the leader's expression was calm and cold. Two hands on his thin yet low knife shank, he stared at that grey shadow. Suddenly his left foot stepped forward and his core was flexed. The knife stroke down powerfully, and he scream, "Bind"

With this formation command, the four guards surrounding the leader swung their knives like a piece of snowflake and forced the gray sword shadow into a tight closed space. Furthermore, that space will then be

broken by that leader's powerful strike, putting all his strength into the blow!

The speed of the gray dim shadow was nimble. It seemed like it was going to be struck down by the knives, but it barely turned around in the tight space and tried to dodge the blow. However, the leader was prepared for this. Hearing his low moan, he pressed his knife shank down forcefully with his left hand and aimed at his target. The grey sword was damaged!

With a small clashing sounds, the nimble sword was like a snake struck on its weakness and fell upon the thick fallen leaves and mud.

For the first time in the battle, the guards finally hit the sword of enemy's great sword master once. But none of them cheered, or to be exact, there was no time to cheer. The fallen leaves on the ground vibrated violently. The grey shadow was like an awakened giant snake and it crawled quickly under the guards' feet.

Dried-out leaves and wet mud was flying everywhere, the dark grey sword shadow rose and struck like lightning, easily breaking the armor of one guard's leg and slashed through one of the aorta.

Oppressed deep moans kept appearing around the knife formation. The guards continued to fall down one by one. Rarely when they hit that grey sword, they could not kill it off completely nor break it. Sadness and anger slowly appeared on the leader's expression. In this solemn and stirring situation, he stepped forward once more, both hands on the knife shank, yelled and slashed once more!

“Bind!” He screamed loudly.

The last surviving guards screamed together, and rushed to that grey shadow uncaring of their lives. They were using their own bodies and knives to set up one last barrier.

With two soft noise, another two guards’ body dropped lifelessly onto the earth. Half of the leader’s ear was chopped off and blood was spilling all around him. A few more cut appeared on his body.

This was the seventh time the sword shadow got struck by the guard’s knives. Its speed was much slower compare to the beginning of the battle. But it still was not struck down. Vibration and flying slowly, it broke down the knife formation and arrived in front of the elder in the old robe.

Now the mob saw the grey sword shadow clearly. It was a small sword with no shank. Its dim body was extremely thin and had no blood stain on it.

The leader kneeled down on one knee with blood all over his body. He lowered his head and gritted his teeth. “ Just one more strike.....just one more strike and my brothers and I will accomplish this impossible mission, except Great Sword Master is Great Sword Master!”

The battle may feel time consuming but the time it took for all the events to occur was inconveniently small.During this time, the elder in the

old robe still had his eyes closed after his sword flew away, almost if he did not know he was in great danger.

But no one noticed, the hands that the elder put on his knees were shaking slightly. His two thumbs were constantly switching from his index to his middle finger, it seemed like he was doing some complicated calculation.

Right when the shankless small sword flew in front of him and was an inch away from his eyebrows, the elder finally opened his eyes and glanced.

With just one glance. the shankless small sword froze in air and was not able to move an inch!

The giant man in the dense forest looked at the the iron scrap that was once the white bright flying sword in his big hands. He was confused and stunned for a moment, and suddenly realized what happened. He raised his head and yelled panickingly, " He is not a Sword Master!"

".....He is a Psychic Master!"

Psychic Master - Those who fight with expertise in not controlling the sword but some sort of force aka chi

Sword Master - Those who focus with the sword as the main weapon and method of killing.

Chapter 11: The Sword that was Praised in Sadness

Perhaps the grey and dull handleless sword small sword heard the cry of the giant man and understood it fell into a trap. It started to vibrate violently in midair. The vibration caused a sharp and forceful sound wave to occur. It almost sounded like a screaming bird wanting to escape its cage.

The elder's two hands were still on his knees and he glanced gently at the handleless small sword an inch away from his eyebrows. However that gentleness contained enormous power and tightly held the escaping sword in place.

Wherever the elder's sight landed, the temperature there dropped rapidly. In a few moments there was a layer of frost on the body of the handleless sword. It started to shake and vibrate even harder, but there was no result from its effort.

After a long time of useless struggle, the handleless sword finally fell onto the ground on top of fallen leaves, almost like it lost its precious life force.

The moment when the handleless sword dropped onto the ground, somewhere in the dense forest of North Mountain, not far from the carriage formation, a painful moan was heard.

Finally a trace of relaxation appeared in the calm pupils of the elder. Two hands supported by the knee, his entire fragile body lift off like wind and landed in front of that giant man.

The man shouted and struck the elder with his fan-like hands. The momentum was not to be ignored. The force was similar to that of a mountain landing on top of the thin body of the elder.

Just when it looked like the elder was going to be crushed to pieces by the two giant hands, the elder looked at the incoming palms expressionless. His dried lips opened slightly and a soundless tone came out. His hands, which were full of dust, crossed each other in front of his body and made a sign.

Following the soundless tone and hand sign, the dirty old robe on elder's body suddenly became rock and persistent. Every wrinkle of the rag disappeared. From the looks of it, the elder was not wearing the robe, but rather the robe supporting his fragile body.

The giant palms stopped. It kept on trembling in the air on top of the elder's head, but the giant man could not land the hit. The movement of other body parts of the giant man also slowed down. His neck started to shake and his body cried out blood. It was clear that the giant man was in unimaginable pain.

The elder's face was sickly white. He was struggling as well. He raised his right arm with all his might and pushed onto the giant man's chest slowly.

The giant man saw the elder's hands approaching inch by inch, but he could do nothing to stop the action. It seemed like he was forced to by a magical force that restricted his movements.

The elder's hand landed on the giant man's chest quietly.

Strong wind suddenly shot forth from the hands of the elder and went straight through the chest of the giant man. With a cracking sound, the rock hard chest was fractured and damaged. The entire surface of the chest sank and caved inward.

Using the opposite force of the speeding wind, elder backed off quickly. The wind of forest blew onto the robe and lifted slightly. The elder retreated back into the carriage and sat down crosslegged once more.

The attack only lasted for a few moments but the elder's intrusion and retreat was quick and traceless. His hands were on his knees and his robe turned shabby again, almost seemed like he had not moved from his original state from the beginning.

The giant man in the depth of dense forest of North Mountain finally regained control over his body. The palms that had not landed on the elder finally moved and crushed the earth, creating a large hole on the mud and fallen leaves. Yet it was all too late, he looked at his bloody chest. cried out a regretful cry and finally crashed into the ground like a mountain.

The elder who sat crosslegged in the carriage glanced at the location. He bent his body forward and started coughing repeatedly. Some red dots could be seen on his robe after the coughing had ended.

The guards used the knife formation and fought with the handleless sword bravely to create some time for the elder. The elder used this precious time to calculate and capture the hidden spot of the enemy Great Sword Master and used the handleless sword as a bridge to

activate his psychic power and damaged the opponent. In doing so, the elder was also weakened due to overuse of his abilities.

When he flew to the opening in the North Mountain and killed the giant man with his hands, the action was extremely risky. Although the attack seemed simple and easy, the risk it carried was also great. His psychic power stored in his Mountain of Qi was drained and he became exhausted.

At least the ending was certain.

The fight at the entry to the way of North Mountain was already over. The barbarians from Great Plain demonstrated their loyalty, courage, and battle skill in the fight. The slightly curved knives slayed all of the opponent assassins, although they pay an extremely big cost. The fortunate survivors seemed to have bathed in blood and to have no energy left to stand.

The number who survived and were able to stand were even fewer.

The elder gave a complicated look at a tree not much far away.

Night arrived, the entrance to the way of North Mountain was silent. This tree's barks fell off piece by piece. Like a man ageing in a short time, unfortunately flecks appeared, and a body showed sign of collapse and decay.

A middle aged scholar wearing green long gown slowly walked out from the back of the tree. He carried an empty circular sheath on his back.

He was good looking, even though his age was a bit old, but if he was on the Gaily-painted Pleasure-boat in Chang An, he could be depicted as "handsome."

However his face now could not be called "handsome" at all. Countless tiny blood drops penetrated out from the pores on his face and hands. Painted him into a scary looking blood man. His green long gown was also permeated by blood. It could be inferred that the body covered by the long gown was also bloody, just like his face and hands.

The mid-aged scholar lifted his sleeve to wipe off the blood and sweat on his eyebrow. He looked at the elder standing by the wagon and looked at the empty sheath. He lowered his voice and sighed, "One miscalculation and the whole plan was ruined. Named guest of South Gate of Great Sky Way, Lu Qing Chen, actually....discarded swordsmanship but Xiu Xing Psychism. If this news was spreaded out, can't imagine how many people would feel surprised."

Remained silent for a moment, he then sighed, "The most surprising thing was that, you are already very old, yet you successfully went into the Seethrough stage*, was there any mysterious techniques in the Great Sky Way?"

The elder, called Lu Qing Chen, answered mildly, "I followed Princess to the north for a year. On the Great Plain, I saw different landscape, different culture, my insight was stimulated, therefore I went up a stage. There was actually nothing to do with the Xiu Xing method of Great Sky Way."

Hearing this unexpected explanation, the mid-aged scholar was dumbfounded for a while and seemed to have gained a realization. After

remaining silent for a really long time, he looked at the head of the guards, who was half-kneeled on the fallen leaves, and said with an extremely serious tone,

“Since I became a Great Sword Master, I had thought that secular power could no longer stop me, but today you and your subordinates gave me a good lecture.”

The mid-aged Scholar made an obeisance by cupping one hand in the other before his chest to the heavily wounded guards. “You brave and fearless soldiers are Tang’s pride.”

The head of guards slightly nodded his head but did not say a single word.

“There are not many Great Sword Masters in Chang An, yet I don’t know you.” The old man Lu Qing Chen looked at the bloody mid-aged scholar “The Academy is really a great place of talents.”

Hearing the word “Academy,” the survivors on the way of North Mountain, couldn’t help but exhibit confusions and surprises. Was this murder actually related to the respectable and holy Academy?

Ning Que involuntarily looked toward the maid, seeing that her face showed some complex expression, but obviously it was not trust.

The mid-aged scholar was surprised again, shaking his head and said sadly, “I didn’t know that you could tell my origin. However, I am not daring to bring shame to the Academy.....I am only a dumb student

expelled from the Academy.”

His body was covered entirely by blood and was shaking, seemed to fall at any moment. Yet facing only one such enemy, the barbarians and guards who survived all felt very tense, treating him as the hardest obstacle ever.

Ning Que also felt very nervous, but he felt more excited and restrained.

He lived in Wei City for many years. He studied Extreme Sense for many years and imagined about these elites based on the legends he heard for many years. Yet today at the entry to the way of North Mountain was his first time in his life seeing a real fight between the elites.

He heard that the Tang’s generals each had his own powerful methods, yet the frontier was peaceful for many years. He, a small unknown soldier at the frontier, had no chance to see such fight on the battlefield.

Handleless sword flying between the fallen leaves in air, giant people pulling out mountain and throwing rocks to destroy carriage, Psychic Power moving freely as eyes closed, and damaging people through space. These extremely inconceivable and mysterious things happened one by one in a really short amount of time, causing to shake with excitement.

When academy, expel, dumb student entered his ear, he felt calm but at the same time his blood froze.

A dumb student expelled from Academy, by using only a dark

handleless sword, could kill almost ten Tang's strongest guards. Then a real student from Academy, would possess how much unimaginable power?

"He was probably Xia Hou's subordinate." The maid said coldly..

Hearing the words "Xia Hou," Ning Que's body became a little stiff. After several seconds it calmed down, but his look toward the people turned from previously applause into cold calculation and evaluation.

"You practice Hao Ran sword art, so it's not that hard to guess that you are from the Academy."

Lu Qing Chen said, "But unfortunately, you did not learn much from the 2nd Floor before you got expelled from the Academy. The startup of your sword had some thunder and wind force, but you forced the force to become strange and secretive."

"Hao Ran Qi was emphasized on candid, straight and nonstop, but you went into a wrong direction. This mistake is so major that even if you encountered me twenty years ago, when I was still young, even if I did not get to the Seethrough stage, you would of still lost to me."

The mid-aged scholar looked down and smiled. The smile appearing on his bloody face made him look very dismal.

As a Great Sword Master who already entered Seethrough, this mid-aged scholar accepted someone's invite and came to assassinate the princess. After he knew the elder's strength, he thought that it would be a

simple thing.

However, the people who gave him intelligence did not know that the old man already got into Seethrough on the Great Plain. More surprisingly, this man from South Gate of the Great Sky Way chose to discard sword and become a Psychic Master instead.

Even so, he still had some chances to winning. Yet this Great Sword Master did not know that, these Tang's guards would cause so much trouble for him, allowing Lu Qing Chen to see his position.

Letting the opponent, especially a Psychic Master, within the same stage, to find out about his position was a really dangerous thing. Lu Qing Chen first controlled his sword shadow, then used the handleless sword as a bridge conducting Psychic Power to hurt him. Facing the Psychic Master who was fastest at attacking, he had no way to react, letting the opponent Psychic Power assaulting both his Sea of Soul and Mountain of Qi, and fragmenting all of his inner organs.

Today he was destined to die at the entry to the way of North Mountain. He did not care about the old man's evaluations at all. However, even if he had to die, he still had to finish something.

* Seethrough Stage-Stage or tier of xiu xing its the fourth stage above the preliminary stage

** Sea of Soul-The area where the soul force (which is different type of force from the Qi) is kept

*** Mountain of Qi-The area in the body where the qi is kept.

Chapter 12: Broken Finger and Thundering Arrow

Once Lu Qing Chen finished his sentence, he began to cough drastically again.

In secular people's imagination, Psychic Masters are the most mysterious. However, only the Psych Masters themselves know that, the seemingly miraculous Psychic Power was actually a double edged sword. While it attacked the enemies, it would deal a lot of damage to their own Sea of Soul or even flesh.

He glanced at the corpse of the giant man, thinking how Tang would lose some of its precious elites due to this battle. He couldn't help but feel unfortunate and sad. He shook his head and sighed,

"Even though Tang had many experts, but there were not that many Great Sword Masters. You have such great power, and you are from the Academy. You should have worked hard to help the nation, but why would you work for the traitors?"

"Traitor? What is a traitor? Master Qing Chen, you were from the Great Sky Way. You should have known the prophecy from the Sky Seeking Court* was being wiped out : Night covers the stars, the nation would soon become chaotic!"

Based on the guards' facial expressions, the mid-aged scholar had already realized that the target of this assassination was not in the wagon. The woman died before was only a scapegoat. He looked at the luxurious wagon that had already become trash.

"I don't care about what General Xia Hou was thinking at all. I only know that we have the same goal. That is, to kill the woman in your group!"

Lu Qing Chen remembered the Sky Seeking Court Event that caused huge influences from more than ten years ago. He remained silent for a while, shook his head and said, "The Academy's spirit proposed is to disregard fate, I am from the Great Sky Way. Yet even I don't believe in such prophecy, you have no need to believe in it at all."

"I followed the Princess for four years already, I had never considered her as the person the prophecy talked about."

After hearing this secret that the lower class people would never know, Ning Que faintly understood why the Princess had insisted to marry the Chief in the Great Plain, and why the Emperor would actually agree.

After thinking of this, he couldn't help but turn his head around, seeing that pretty maid getting an angry and cold face.

The mid-aged scholar slowly held back all his facial expressions and stopped replying to Lu Qing Chen. Instead, he closed his eyes and took a deep breathe. As he inhaled, the fallen leaves surrounded him started to flow around him.

"What else do you want to do?"

The old man Lu Qing Chen frowned as he stared at him. "I waited for you for seventy seven seconds. During that time you still could not

regulate your pranayama** successfully, showing that your inner organs were already broken, and your Sea of Qi was destroyed, plus your natal sword is useless now. Now, you can't even beat a regular soldier. Don't you want to have a calm moment before death?"

In common people's heart, no matter Sword Master or Psychic Master, these Xiu Xingist all are very mysterious. Some non-educated people even believe that those powerful Xiu Xingists can no longer die. Therefore even though they saw the mid-aged scholar was about to die, the heavily wounded Great Plain barbarians and guards were still not daring to loosen their guard.

Until they heard what Lu Qing Chen said, they eventually realized that the terrifying Great Sword Master really could not fight anymore. Suddenly, they began to relax due to fatigue and wounds.

Only Ning Que still remained cautious. Since the beginning of the battle, he hid like a quail inside the fallen trees, staring at the bloody mid-aged scholar. He held the bow and arrow and moved slowly, seeking the best position to shoot.

Tang Empire valued pride over life. No matter educated or illiterate, everyone favored reputation. In their point of view, when the enemy fought hard and was about to die, he should earn the respect corresponding to his strength and status.

At this moment, the person about to die was a respectable Great Sword Master, so the head of guards would nod back as a courtesy. Even though the opponent killed many of his loyal subordinates, Lu Qing Chen would talk with him and explain the puzzles, allowing him to complete his last word or give his last request.

Ning Que was never a typical Tang civilian.

He values reputation, but he insists that reputation is not his life. He never believes that there is anything more important than life in the world. Even if there is, it will not be reputation.

He is just a little soldier on the frontier. He did not understand the way the strong Xiu Xingists fought, and today was his first time seeing such fight.

However, today this Great Sword Master became his enemy, then he would keep remaining cautious, getting ready to kill the opponent at any time using any method.

He had a harsh vagrant life since he was very young. In the frontier, he was living on the borderline of dead because he had to fight with the barbarians. From these experiences, he formed a ingrained understanding: 'Only the dead enemies are safe enemies, and good enemies.' And only at that time would he probably take off his hat, and stare at the enemies' corpses to show some respect.

At this point, a strange event suddenly happened, or, happened as he expected.

The fallen leaves by the tree flow quickly, the mid-aged scholar's long gown suddenly became swollen, and bloods came out of his five sense organs. It seems like there was a horrifying invisible power flowing from the fallen trees into his body, pushing out his own power with the flow of blood.

"Absorb the universe inside!"

Seeing this, Lu Qing Chen's mood suddenly changed. He looked at the mid-aged scholar and criticized at him angrily, "The student from the Academy uses Satanic technique? You...you dare to betray your mentor and ancestor!"

Although the battle in the opening of North Mountain was dangerous and intense, the elder did not change his expressions even a tiny bit. In Tang's culture, if there was a battle, then death from defeat or glory from victory were common. Killing was not frowned upon when the reasons were legitimate. However when he discovered that the middled age scholar used self-destructing techniques from Satanism, he finally shown his hidden rage.

"If I walk on a righteous path, why would I be afraid to use Satanism techniques," The scholar raised his hand slowly, and pointed at the elder sitting on the side of the carriage, and said indifferently, "If this is damnation, then let me be damned into the Underworld and can never reincarnate for eternity."

The moment he finished speaking, a cut appeared at the bottom of his index finger from

his right hand. The cut was so deep the bones inside were showing slightly. Hearing his painful moan, the finger bursted from the hand and accelerated rapidly into a bloody shadow, aiming straight towards Lu Qing Chen's forehead.

Containing the qi of nature inside his body and molding his body into a

natal sword, then compress all of his qi and life force into one strike was a most classic Satanism technique!

The elder named Lu Qing Chen was the strongest person in the party escorting the princess. He was a very important part of the group especially in this situation where all of the barbarian soldiers and Tang guards were badly wounded or dead. If he was going to be killed by this broken finger, then who was able to defend against a deadly strike from a dying Great Sword Master?

Two barbarian guards rushed towards the middle aged scholar shouting, but they quickly fell onto the fallen leaves after two steps. The curvy knives in their hands also slipped out of their hand when they crushed into the ground.

The leader of the guard was crawling on the ground, which was flowing with blood. There was a crossbow next to a dead guard not far away from him. Although he struggled with his life to obtain the crossbow, he was still too slow. Even if he successfully got the weapon, Lu Qing Chen was too weak and exhausted to save himself from the strike of the broken finger.

In the dark and gloomy entrance to the north mountain, no one expected that a Great Sword Master from the Academy will use Satanism techniques. No one was prepared for this. The ending seemed to be clear - the elder will be killed by the Great Sword Master and the whole team will be slaughtered.

But Ning Que was prepared.

He prepared for a long time.

When the scholar spoke indifferently of his Satanism, Ning Que was not scared or angry. He cautiously watched every movement and action of the enemy and quietly moved his body, finding the perfect position.

When the middle aged scholar started to absorb the qi of nature into his body, the fallen leaves were flying and swirling in the air with the flow of qi. Using the leaves as camouflage, Ning Que stood up and aimed his bow at the opponent and pulled the bowstring.

Exerting force from his right arm and waist, he violently pulled out the bowstring. Just like a full moon, the soft but enduring bowstring stored tremendously force and let out a buzz. The arrow on the string was like a snake, it vibrated slightly but quickly rested its body, preparing for its deadly attack.

When the broken finger of the middle aged scholar flew towards the elder, Ning Que released his index and middle finger. The bowstring bounced back rapidly and an arrow shot out like a lighting, piercing through multiple falling leaves and went straight toward someone's chest.

Weng weng weng!

The bowstring vibrated violently. The black arrow flew into the air like dark lighting and pierced through the falling leaves and tear the night sky apart. Just before the Great Sword Master's broken finger landed its hit on the elder's forehead, the arrow shot into the scholar's chest.

The flesh and body of xiuxingist were not much stronger than regular people. Especially xiuxingists like swordmasters, psychic masters, and charmist. Their bodies became really weak due to long periods of meditation; therefore they need to focus on close range defenses. Besides loyal guards defending their sides, these xiuxingists also wear light armor inside their robes in case of ambushes from assassins.

In the last moment of his life, this Great Sword Master from the Academy did not hesitate to use Satanism techniques to kill the strongest Psychic Master of the enemy. It was clear that his mind was determined to accomplish his goal, that's why when he noticed that someone was using a bow to sneak attack him, he didn't do anything to stop the person.

There was only lakes formed by the qi of nature in his sea of soul. The broken finger was like a black line surfing on a dangerous wave, struggling to advance further. The scholar needed to focus all of his spiritual force on the broken finger to successfully land the strike on the elder. He did not allow himself to be distracted by anything, even if it was a killing blow from a cold arrow.

Plus there was a protective light armor beneath his green robe, he believed that the arrow shot out of nowhere has no ability to kill him from such a long distance.

"Pu", with a quiet sound, the arrow stuck into his chest and the arrowhead rotated with a much faster speed than a regular arrow. The sharp arrowhead teared the green robe apart in an instant and squeezed into the small openings of the light armor.

The arrow was in the flesh of the Great Sword Master, and blood are flowing out of it.

But the middle aged scholar did not care, he did not even lower his head to look at his wound. The tiny blood drops on his forehead came together to form a stream and flowed towards his eyebrows.

Having an arrow in his body was painful, but he did not die from it, so what?

But Ning Que shot more than one arrow...

* Sky Seeking Court-a place in the capital where the people try to predict the future reading stars

** pranayama-meditation to smooth out ur breathing a yoga technique.

Chapter 13: A Crimson Flower Blossomed from The Green Robe

Sho!

The second arrow followed the first one like chained lighting. The arrow pierced into the middle aged scholar's chest with a terrifying sound of tearing flesh. The place where the second arrow landed was exactly the same location where the first arrow penetrated the armor.

There seemed to be no time gap just before the third arrow arrived. It again pierced into the same exact location where the two arrow before landed, except now there was no protection blocking its path. The third arrow penetrated through his body!

No one knew how Ning Que accomplished this seemingly impossible task. In just a flash, he used a regular hard wooden bow and shot three consecutive arrows. Furthermore, no one could understand how this normal young soldier obtained such high level of mastery in archery; He was able to shoot into the same spot three times in a row!

The middle aged scholar felt a hard and heavy wooden stick pushed into his chest, and moved backwards for two steps due to its tremendous momentum. He realized there was a warm flow around his chest, until that warmth became boiling hot.

He looked down instinctively, and saw an arrow penetrated almost all the way through his body. Only a small portion of the arrow and feather was seen outside of his clothing. Blood streamed out of his body and a crimson flower blossomed from the green robe.

The scholar looked at the crimson flower on his green robe, disbelieving of what just happened. His face was not only filled with shock and bewilderment, but also with his own blood from the wound.

He lost his strength and slowly sat down onto the ground, which was filled with fallen leaves and mud.

Even xiuxingists, even xiuxingists who used Satanism techniques and absorbed the qi of nature into their body cannot control their spiritual force after their heart got destroyed.

The invisible string controlling the broken finger was tore apart when he fell and sat on the earth.

The bloody broken finger could no longer harm a Psychic Master after its master lose its control, even if that Psychic Master was exhausted of energy and qi.

Lu Qing Chen raised his eyebrows and shook away the broken finger in front of him.

The broken finger slid past his face and flew towards the carriage behind the elder. Hearing a few collapsing noise, half of the carriage was destroyed and fell into the ground, crumbling to debris.

A tiny portions of the qi of nature absorbed by the middle aged scholar was enchanted into the broken finger. Although it lost its controller, it could still cause this terrifying damage. If it wasn't for the three arrows,

this broken finger definitely could cause huge amounts of damage to the elder, and this ambush would be resulted in the death of the elder.

All of the last surviving guards and soldiers knew this, but the scholar was the person that knew the importance of the three arrows the most. He painfully stared at the arrows inside of his chest, struggling to raise his head and glanced at the back of the carriage formation, wanting to see what the archer looked like.

The combination of perfect timing of the arrows and the master level of archery was the reason Ning Que accomplished this seemingly impossible task of killing a Great Sword Master. He saved everyone including the Tang princess from absolute danger..... It seemed to be the time to accept the shocking, thankful, and praising expressions from the group.

However, Ning Que thought otherwise. There was no relieving smile on his face. He still held his hard wooden bow tightly in his hand, the arrows already on the string, and the string was already pulled. He aimed at the Great Sword Master sitting under the tree, but his ears were focusing on the light brushing sounds on top of the tree.

He stayed cautious.

"Xia Hou."

"Xia Hou!"

"Xia Hou...."

When the maid told him that the Great Sword Master should be Xia

Hou's subordinate, and he also admitted this, Ning Que had been begun repeating this name to himself in his mind.

Xia Hou was not called Xia Hou something something.

His last name is Xia, and his first name is Hou.

As one of the four most influential Great Generals, his Xiu Xing was really high, had many military accomplishments, and was brave yet cold and ruthless. He stationed the troop in the Meng Liu Camp for years, and obtained his fame for being brutal and warlike.

However, while his last name is Xia, he never allowed his children to use Xia as their last name. Instead, he let them to use his whole name as their last name. So, his 1st son was called Xia Hou Jing, 2nd son was called Xia Hou Wei, and so on. When the court's intellectuals asked about it, Xia Hou answered arrogantly, "I want to create a last name myself, that would pass on for thousand centuries, and I will be the ancestor, so they need to use my name as the last name."

"Therefore the family name from now is Xia Hou."

.....

General Xia Hou is a celebrity, but Ning Que kept saying his name in his mind. The tone changing from narrate to surprise to slightly sneering. Obviously the fact that Xia Hou is famous is not the reason why Ning Que repeated the name.

Since he was four, the name, engraved into his blood, had always been hidden deeply in his mind, and he never forgot about it.

He had never seen Xia Hou.

But he knew Xia Hou's hobby, knew who Xia Hou's favorite concubine was, knew why Xia Hou wanted to kill that concubine, knew Xia Hou would eat three kilograms of mutton in every meal, and even knew Xia Hou's daily routine of taking pisses.

He believed that he was the person who understood the Tang's famous general the most, because he believed that there was no one who wanted to kill this Tang's famous general more than he did.

Under the rough and powerful figure of that general hid a cold and cunning heart. He was harsh and ruthless, but he only trusted his own hands. Therefore he would not rely solely on the foreign middle aged scholar to assassinate the princess.

For sure that general sent his most loyal assassins and subordinates to watch this ambush and observe how the fight went. Maybe those underlings would jump out at important moments to finish the task.

In Ning Que's eyes, those moments were the best moments.

Behind the half collapsed carriage a crying little boy stuck out his head. The pretty maid raised her dress and ran towards him nervously.

Ning Que extended his right arm as quickly as a thunderstrike and

knocked her onto the ground.

The tree branches on top of the scholar shook violently and broke. The fragments fell onto the ground while two masked men dressed in black appeared and threw two metal balls at Ning Que and took out their long swords from the sheaths behind their backs.

The two accelerating metal ball was painted with red dots. They were firebombs equipped by the elite force of Tang borderline armies; their burning effect? Horrifying.

But Ning Que was no stranger to these firebombs because he was also once a soldier in the army camps,. He threw the bow away as fast as he could and his two hands reached for the sword handle behind his back, then he screamed, "Umbrella!"

Chapter 14 I have three knives

Simply a word "Umbrella."

No verb.

Ning Que also did not call out Sang Sang's name.

The master and maid had been living together since very young. Together they cooperated to survive on the mountain, forest and plain for years, so they already knew what each other's thinking. They could inform each other by giving simply a look or a word or a hand signal.

Immediately after the hearing the word "umbrella," Sang Sang, like a mice, quickly ran to the side of the maid, then pushed the handle of the umbrella, opening up the extremely large black umbrella, like a dark sky appearing in the forest on the Way of North Mountain, blocking off all the starlights.

Two firebombs dropped on the ground, burning up fast. The vigorous fire causing the fallen leaves on the ground to fly up. These leaves then caused the fire to get even bigger that people could not stop it.

The survived guards and barbarians around the wagon, looked at the big fire, thought about the noble hiding over there, suddenly felt hopeless. They were all heavily wounded, so they had no more energy to help out, and all they could do is watching that hot fire wall destroying everything in a second.

However, they did not see that, the big black umbrella did not get burned up. When the high temperature fire touched the greasy umbrella cover, it strangely became small and weak. What kind of material was this black umbrella made from, that it could block off the starlights like a dark sky, and also keep the fire away!?

Below the big black umbrella, the skinny Sang Sang nervously put her head down, closed her eyes, shut her mouth, her hands tightly held the handle of the umbrella, defending against the terrifying fire that was only a few inches away. Her left hand holding the handle tightened temporarily, but it relaxed for a while for no reason, appearing to be extremely restrained, but also seems like she had a difficult struggle inside her mind.

The maid was also under the black umbrella. She sensed the high temperature separated by the umbrella, looked at the fire, felt extremely nervous, yet when she looked through the gap, seeing the readily opening fighting scene, a surprise came up in her eyes.

The men dressed in black hiding in the jungle, had holden their breathe for a really long time. They silently spectated the reactions of the princess's subordinates, judged and analyzed their plans, eventually ascertained where the target really was. Then, when the Great Sword Master and the giant man grabbed Lu Qing Chen's attention, they silently moved close to here and started the assault.

Fragmented wood fell off, as the two men dressed in black jumped down. The time they chose was just about right. They first threw out two firebombs without hesitation, then got close to the opponents to assassinate them, giving no time and opportunity for Ning Que to use his

archery skill.

They were not powerful Xiu Xingists, but they were more expert than those Xiu Xingists in assassination.

Seeing two assassins jumping out, Ning Que's facial expression did not change much. He did not feel surprised and nervous, throwing out the bows and arrows like they were useless shoes, then jumping up at the moment the two firebombs were thrown out.

The muscles at his waist and legs tightened then loosened, his legs seemed to have fixed to springs, without run-up, suddenly jumped up in the original place.

At this point the firebombs started to burn. His body was over the fire wall, like he was stepping on the fire and used it as a tool to float in air.

He passed through the big fire in air, his hands making two hollow fists - along with inertia his fists and legs swing to the back, his body inclined to the front - the entire movement appeared to be very natural and coordinated, like a bird gliding in air, and the handles of the knives on his back were about to go in his two hollow fists.

Jumping over the fire wall and floating in air, while Ning Que was doing these movements, he consistently stared at the two assassins. His eyes contained no any distracting thoughts, only extreme calmness and attentiveness, seemed to be abnormally unhurried.

The black maid looked at his movement of jumping out of the fire wall,

seeing the youngster’s calmness, suddenly felt extremely cold for no reason.

At this moment, she remembered what she saw when she followed the Chief for Great Plain hunting a half year ago.

When that young tiger jumped towards him from the jungle, with front claws clenched up, back feet slightly contracted, eyes contained not a single brutal or violent feeling, only extreme calmness and attentiveness, at that short moment it actually showed a sort of noble temperament. That tiger’s eye expression was the most terrifying expression she had seen in her life. Sometimes during midnight, she might even awakened by the tiger’s calm and unhurried look in her dream.

--The expressionless calmness represented power and confidence, attentiveness represented volition and determination. Tiger hunting, attentive and calm yet not cold, because to tear every enemy into pieces, was not his desire to let off pressure, but his innate talent.

In the fire the maid looked at Ning Que’s face, came up with such thought.

Assassins who had been living in the darkness of light were creatures most sensitive to danger, even the maid felt the peril under Ning Que’s calmness. The two assassins dressed in black stared at the youngster who jumped through the fire wall and instinctively felt uneasy. They did not feel this nervous even when killing Yan empire’s cavalry back in the days. Their hands holding the long swords paralyzed under the extreme

pressure.

In the blowing sound of wind, Ning Que jumped right between the two men. His cotton shirt was still burning a little from his previous actions, the fire lingered and brought light into the night of the dense forest.

Two rusted long swords were pulled out quickly from the back of his shoulders and slashed towards the assassins like a rainstorm. Consecutive clashing noises spread throughout the the forest. A strong wind breezed by and blew the fire on the burning shirt into smaller sparks, but brightened the battlefield even better than before.

Knives and swords were slashing against each other, Ning Que bounced his body forward and forcefully stepped into the middle of the two assassins. Ning Que used the enemies' sword backs as direction while his waist switched from a chopping motion to a dragging motion to slice right into their ribs.

The heavy knife blade slashed right into the chest bones of the two assassins from under. Their rib cages were broken, flesh and blood were squeezed out by the body of the blade. The assassins cried painfully, but showed the unmatched will of Tang soldiers at their dying moments. They forfeited their swords and used their own body to lock Ning Que's two knives in place.

Just this moment, another assassin dropped down like a raging ghost. His two hands were holding a sharp dagger, which was striking towards the back of Ning Que's neck with unstoppable determination.

There was a third assassin in the forest!

No matter from what perspective, it seemed that the two assassins were the last attempt. It was hard to believe they still had another plan. This plan may seemed repetitive and unnecessary but it was ruthless; The assassins did not have their lives in mind when they made this plan!

No one could have predicted this situation, except Ning Que, or the young maid under the black umbrella.

"Six! Two!"

The young maid under the black umbrella shrank her body nervously. Just when the third assassin stroke toward Ning Que, she closed her eyes tightly and used all her force to yell out two numbers.

It was two very simple numbers, what could it possibly warn Ning Que of? Was it a secret code or direction? But she could not see the assassin because her eyes were closed. Even if she did measure the location of the assassin accurately, at this moment Ning Que's two knives were still locked in the chests of the two assassins, what could he possibly done?

"Six? Two? that is pretty tall."

Hearing Sang Sang's yelling, Ning Que quietly complained in head. He released his two hands from the weapons without hesitation while the two dying assassins were using their lives to hold his knives and locking him in place. Now that his two hands were empty and the lingering sparks were dying out while the night kept on getting darker, he held tightly a handle wrapped in cotton which was soaked in blood and fiercely pulled out his last knife from his back.

Two hands holding the long knife handle tightly, the blade came out of the sheath with a abrupting sound. Ning Que did not peek an eye toward his back and he turned around, putting all of his force into his long knife, and ripped the night sky apart with his strike.

It was like he had an eye on the back of his head. This forceful strike accurately landed on the assassin who was accelerating downward. The sharp blade sent the dagger in the assassin's hands flying.

Then the long knife sliced right into the assassin's neck bones with no interruption.

The momentum of the blade was so strong that the knife did not stop until it was halfway through the his neck.

The assassin did not have time to moan. He jumped down from the branches of the tree and then fell onto the dried fallen leaves, his knees were on the ground.

Ning Que backed off a little and held a handle which was in another assassin's chest, pulled the knife out quickly and returned to the third assassin. He slashed the other side of broken neck and the two blades met in the middle of the assassin's bone.

Blood was spilling everywhere. The head of the assassin dropped on the ground and rolled away from his knees and the fallen leaves. It rolled a long distance in the middle of the forest.

During the war between Tang and Yan, General Xia Hou's elite force assassinated countless cavalry. Those secret assassin units were formed by the best soldiers. Although they were not xiuxingists, their performance in battles were excellent. There were times when the units successfully assassinated xiuxingists.

Normal people had no idea what the secret assassin unit under General Xia Hou consisted of, but Ning Que knew.

He knew the assassin unit always attended their missions with three killers.

That's why he started to carry three knives on his back from his younger days.

Chapter 15 He is the Lumberjack in the Shu Bi Pond

Since Ning Que grew up in mountains and prairies where violent beasts roamed freely, assassins skilled in ambush at night was no danger to him. The mysterious xiuxingist was the reason for his uneasiness. After he used his dual blades to capitalize the third assassin, he swiftly returned to the camp and quickly picked his hard wooden bow up and aimed at the Great Sword Master once again.

But this time his cautiousness seemed to be unnecessary. The middle aged scholar wearing a green robe did not move. He leaned on the big tree and looked quietly at the youngster near the campfire with his dark pupils. He whispered something under his breath and smiled, then opened his palm and passed away.

Ning Que aimed silently at the corpse of the Great Sword Master for a long time; He then slowly put down his bow and arrows because his two arms were shaking due to fatigue, not until that moment he felt the sore muscles and the tiredness in his body.

He asked without turning his head, "Any problem?"

The explosion of the firebomb ignited the fallen leaves, but the mud on the entrance to North Mountain was extremely wet. The fire died out over time and that big black umbrella was closed once again. Sang Sang squatted half way on the ground, raised and shook her head while looking at Ning Que's back. She knew that even she did not say anything, her young master knew what she did.

The pretty maid knew Ning Que was not asking her. She stood up and

ran quickly to the collapsed carriage formation and started to lift and throw the heavy debris away crazily. She finally found the little boy who was covered in the fragments and hugged him dearly and wiped off the dusts on his face softly.

There were approximately six or seven barbarian soldiers and Tang guards left. They struggled to get up and walked to the debris of the fancy carriage. The heavily wounded guard leader knelt with the last surviving members, lowered his head onto the ground and apologized, "I'm sorry, we could not stop the bandits from bothering your Highness. We should be punished."

The surrounding stars and the leftover sparks shined and brightened the scene. The bloodsoaked men gathered around and knelt before the maid carrying a child. It was not particularly sad, but rather solemn and ironic.

Sang Sang walked toward Ning Que and they observed this scene silently. They weren't surprised because they knew the true identity of the maid.

After resting for a while, the guards and barbarians struggled to bandage and heal each other. They waited until they gained back some strength and then started to clean up the battlefield; they lifted back some badly wounded companions and killed some enemies who were on their last breaths. After doing all this, these tough and strong men looked backwards instinctively.

Looking at the youngster who was wearing a burnt out cotton shirt, the expressions in the eyes of the guards were mixed and complicated. Some were shocked, some were confused, some were even afraid..... They saw

the previous actions of Ning Que. They knew the youngster's was skilled in martial techniques and a master in archery, but he was not an invincible elite xiuxingist.

The guards and the elder were the ones who fought back against the strongest of the enemy, the two xiuxingists. If it was not for the guards' selfless sacrifice which weakened much of the Great Sword Master's strength and force, Ning Que could not have the opportunity to slain him with the three arrows.

But because of this reason, they felt that the youngster was an incredible character.

His moment and angle of attack was accurate and deadly. The youngster may appear soft and naive, but a calm and daring heart hid under his exterior. Especially at the end when he used the three knives to kill the three assassins, the outcome was dazzling. How could he do all these things at such a young age? How many people did he kill at the borderline city, how many heads had he chopped off?

The guard leader was using a tree branch as a walking stick and struggled to walk towards the young master and his maid, then he bowed respectfully. Although he did not thank them, his action showed his thankfulness from the bottom of his heart.

Ning Que held Sang Sang's hand and dodged his bow. Just like what the dead Great Sword Master said, the strict rules and the ironed will of this group of Tang warriors were enough to be respected by any enemy or friend.

"I can see that you haven't get any training for fighting. If we fight against each other without using any weapon, I think you can't beat me. However, even I, when the three assassins appeared, probably wouldn't be able to survive under their assault, and of course I wouldn't kill them that easily like you just did."

The head of the guards looked at Ning Que's young face, suppressed the surprise he had in his heart, asked using a hoarse sound, "Youngster, I am really curious about your killing skill, where did you learn it?"

Ning Que scratched the back of his head and remained silent for a bit, then smiled and replied, "Killing skill, of course learned from killing."

He obviously could not tell this head of guards that since he was four, when he found out about the name Xia Hou, he had started to prepare, prepare to get killed by him, or kill him.

This influential and powerful Tang general did not know at all that, at the distant frontier small city, there is a youngster practicing usage of knife through chopping firewoods everyday, analyzing all the fighting styles of his subordinate elites, and concluding countless counterplans.

Therefore, to Ning Que, the three assassins died under his knife, was simply an absolute outcome due to his decade of hard training. If his opponents were changed, such as this head of guards in front of him, he would hardly obtain such pretty accomplishment.

Today, from the battle at the way of North Mountain, Ning Que finally encountered General Xia Hou's subordinates. Maybe this was only an occasion, or maybe this was fate, but no matter what, the knife and

archery of revenge finally began revealing its coldness.

The head of guards put his hand at the wounded chest, frowned and looked at the indifferent youngster, "You are only around fifteen, did you actually kill more than I?"

"If animals are counted, then I killed quite a lot." Ning Que laughed and answered.

"I am talking about kill human." The head became of serious, then explained, "I am not querying you anything, I am actually very curious."

Ning Que rubbed his face, remained silent for a while then stared at his and said, "The highest income you can earn at the frontier city is through killing horse gangsters, we call this thing chopping firewoods. In the recent years I am the leader of the group to chop firewoods. So if you talk about kill people, I actually killed many in these years."

A Great Plain barbarian followed behind the head of guards, preparing to thank this young soldier. He had the same question in his mind. However, after he heard Ning Que's reply, he turned and walked away immediately. Faintly it could be seen that his steps were messy, and his shoulders slightly shaking.

Another Great Plain barbarian looked at him and questioned, "Dumu(a name). what happened?"

The so called "Dumu" Great Plain barbarian sat down by the fire, hardly raised his wounded arm, flapped his face that was numb due to fear, said,

"That youngster....should be the legendary Lumberjack in the Shu Bi Pond."

After this word was out, the four Great Plain barbarians sitting by the fire changed their face immediately. They stopped saying anything. Someone secretly turned up his head, looked towards Ning Que, then quickly looked down, like he was afraid the youngster seeing his peep.

Before the barbarians were subdued to the Princess, they were all famous horse gangsters on the Great Plain, well known for their fierceness. But to them, Tang's powerful frontier soldiers were the real horse gangsters. Those Tang cavalry at the frontier, whenever the season changed so there were not enough supplies, would conduct an amateur money-making activity - ransacking Great Plain horse gangsters.

The Tang frontier soldiers called this activity "chop firewoods." The horse gangsters would call such bloody battle "lumber." They called the most fierce and tough Tang cavalry leader "lumberjack," and the Lumberjack in the Shu Bi Pond....is the most fierce and terrifying of the lumberjacks. He is the reason why Shu Bi Pond became red, the nightmare of the Great Plain Barbarians, and the horror story at the side of firewood.

But before this night, they never thought that this lumberjack was so young.

Chapter 16 He came out of mountain, with a little girl

A bloody and intense battle had just ended. The last surviving soldiers' attitudes toward Ning Que had underwent a slight change. During the trip leaving Wei city, the soldiers may respected Ning Que's ability as a guide. But if they encountered a big event or are in need of a major decision, the guards would treat Ning Que as a useless rock on the sidewalk. However, now the guards will instinctively ask Ning Que for permission when they were doing something.

After obtaining the princess' permission, the guard leader followed Ning Que's suggestion and did not immediately leave the entrance to North Mountain. Instead, he decided to let all the wounded soldiers to stay and rest to heal, while hoping the aiding troops from west of North Mountain will arrive during sunrise.

The weekend elder, Lu Qing Chen, calmly looked at the youngster resting beside the campfire. A smile climbed onto his face. His right thumb slowly rubbed against his index finger, and shook his head at last.

There were two fire camps around the carriage. Although the wind in the dense forest was strong, the wetness of rotten leaves helped to control the spreading of the flame. The guard leader and wounded soldiers gathered around one of the fire camp, leaving the better spot for the princess, elder, and the small boy. They did not forget the difference in social status even in an urgent situation like this.

After finishing up bandaging and their meal, the barbarians from the Great Plain could not resist their thirst after battle and started drinking.

The people around the fire camp passed the wineskin around; when it got to Sang Sang, the young maid shook her head. A barbarian named Du Mu walked toward Ning Que with a respecting expression, and passed the wineskin to Ning Que with his two hands.

Someone was observing this scene, and her pretty eyebrows wrinkled. She knew the loyal barbarians serving her were once dangerous bandits who roamed the Great Plain. They hardly ever show respect to anyone besides her. However this time the expression in their eyes not only contained respect, but also fear - even if the barbarians were thankful that the youngster turned the battle around and saved their lives, why do they fear him?

Ning Que took the wineskin and drank a sip, and his eyebrows wrinkled because his throat was burned by the rather strong alcohol. He looked at the elder sitting next to the campfire and thought of something. He pushed his exhausted body up with two hands and walked towards the elder. But before Ning Que even greeted the elder with a formal gesture, a cold voice interfered him.

"Sit."

Ning Que turned his head towards the pretty maid sitting next to the firecamp. He looked at her beautiful face brightened by the blaze, and signed in his heart. He bowed respectfully and sit properly at a place not too far and not too close to her.

Although Ning Que regarded her as an idiot, their social status differed greatly. If she was the stars in the sky, then Ning Que will be the worms in

the field. Therefore he must be careful of his manners, he must be respectful to her.

Because she was no maid, she was Li Yu, the fourth princess of Tang Empire.

Li Yu quietly looked at the youngster's face. His face was young and normal, except the dimples that blossomed when he smiled and the freckles on his face, there was nothing special about him.

Just a normal young soldier like him performed outstandingly during the last fight. When Li Yu saw Ning Que's attack, he reminded of her the cold yet dangerous tigers leaping over the bushes on the Great Plain. She did not know why, but whenever she saw Ning Que next to her, her mood will become calm and relaxed.

Perhaps the youngster was guarding her like the tiger on the Great Plain.

But the problem was not that she liked the youngster. From Wei City until now, no matter when she disguised as a maid or revealed her true identity as the princess, she never liked the actions of this borderline soldier

What made her displeased was that she felt Ning Que's respect towards her was just on the outside. She couldn't feel anything from his proper manners and gestures; she even felt that Ning Que might have scoffed at her in some dark corners - A woman's instinct was a terrifying weapon, no matter farm wives in the field or queens in the palace.

As the most noble princess of Tang empire, as long as she thought a low rank soldier was laughing at her, she should feel angry. However, this princess's feeling now was, when sitting with the opponent, alongside the firewoods, actually a relax feeling of security, a feeling of being protected.

She liked this feeling, yet she didn't like the fact that the occurrence of this feeling was because of Ning Que. Therefore, she actually felt humiliated and mad. So she narrowed her eyes as she looked at one side of his face, and intentionally spoke with a colder voice.

"During the battle, you seemed to want to go to the wagon to save this one?"

This one is what kind of princess? Da Ming princess? Li Xia princess? In any case at that time, the real princess was not in the wagon, so now this one say you wanted to save the princess before, of course she was actually being sarcastic and sneered that you only cared about accomplishing honor.

"Actually.....I knew that highness is highness when I was at Wei City."

Ning Que looked at her and explained seriously, highness is highness, therefore the me palace at the wagon obviously wouldn't be princess. Such disguise might be effective for diversion, but in the smart people's eyes it's simply a small trick.

Li Yu slightly frowned. She did not ask Ning Que more about when did he find out about his identity. Probably due to the previous battle and the sense of security she felt after, she had a good judgement on the youngster's ability.

Suddenly she asked coldly, "You said you learned the killing skill in military, but you were only around fifteen now. Back then when Wei City was drafting you were only a little kid, why would the frontier soldiers take you?"

Ning Que thought that you were only a sixteen year old girl too when you were married to the chief on the Great Plain. When he was about to bull shit some random answers, Sang Sang came unnoticedly, sitting by his side.

Looked at the quiet small girl sitting next to him, his hearted slightly softened, staring at the fire in front of him, thinking back to his memory, "Princess should know that I picked up Sang Sang at the street when I was really young. At that time we were all very little. We accidentally went into the big Mian Mountain. When we were about to die from hunger and thirst, we encountered an old hunter."

He turned up his head, looked at the Princess's pretty face, said, "The old hunter was not a Xiu Xingist. He did not really save us for a good purpose, but anyway, he taught me to hunt. I learned archery from him. Later on....the old hunter died. So I lived with Sang Sang in Mian Mountain through hunting."

A really simple narration, but the Princess could imagine a really vivid picture. A ten year old little boy carried a six year old little girl, hardly walking in the dangerous Mian Mountain. He had a little wooden arch in his hand, and the little girl carried a set of arrows in her back.

Sometimes they might not be able to catch any animals, and sometimes

they might be chased by leopard on the mountain. Occasionally, the two children would celebrate for simply shooting a rabbit, and occasionally saw the lit stockaded village but had to leave silently.

In Li Yu's eyes, Ning Que's face no longer looked that mean. She frowned and asked, "It was so dangerous in a mountain. Why didn't you seek help from the government? Tang gave a lot of aids of the orphans."

Ning Que looked down and picked up a firewood, said with a deep voice, "Living, was actually easier in a place where there were little people."

A really simple word, but actually hide much blood and tear from harsh living, Li Yu blankly looked at the master and maid at the side of firewoods, suddenly asked, "That old hunter...how did he die?"

Ning Que looked up, replied calmly, " I killed him, killed him with a knife."

He did not explain why he had to kill that old hunter, and he would not explain to the noble princess who never experienced the most dirty and dark part in the bottom class of the world. He probably would never explain to anyone in his life. He simply dotingly rubbed Sang Sang's little brain, and pulled her into his arms.

Chapter 17 The fable alongside the fire woods

The clumsy little boy reached out his head out of princess Li Yu's arms and looked curiously at Ning Que. He acted like Sang Sang and put his head in Li Yu's hug once again, his little face rubbed against her shirt and some mucus stayed on her shirt.

Li Yu took out her handkerchief and wiped the Barbarian little boy's face without feeling disgusted. She turned her head toward Ning Que and said nonchalantly, "Serve me after you get to Chang An, I will give you a good future."

Ning Que already guessed the true identity of the barbarian little boy, but he never thought the princess would treat her stepson with such love and care. His evaluation of her changed slightly. Since he was thinking about her actions, his reaction was a little slow. He waited for a moment and said, "Your honor, after I arrive Chang An I will be attending the entrance exam of the Academy."

People could have multiple explanations for a single sentence. Ning Que's reply can be understood as he did not have time to serve the princess, or it could be understood as a rejection. In his rejection contained his pride - if he did get into the Academy, the princess did not need to worry about his future, because everyone who graduated the Academy will succeed.

"Are you sure you can obtain the permission to take the entrance exam, and successfully pass it?" Li Yu looked at him coldly and continued, "Although Tang Empire treat the educated with fortune and respect, but

this "treat" has its limits. If you believe all of the educated can find their opportunity and become successful, why did Scholar Liu from the last dynasty wasted his life in the brothel.

Ning Que looked at her and said earnestly, "I understand, that's why I am here asking Your Highness to help me clean up the unnecessary obstacles. I don't want to miss my chance of getting into the Academy just because I am poor."

Li Yu stared back him with suspiciousness and remained silent for a long time. She did not understand why did this young soldier reject her invitation so directly with such a calm tone.

Let it be known that she was the most beloved princess of the emperor and the entire empire, while Ning Que was just a regular soldier in a borderline city. If it was any other person, even if they obtained the permission to take the entrance exam to the Academy, they would still accept her invitation with gratefulness and joy.

After the long moment of silence, she said quietly, "I will help you, because I owe you."

After finishing her sentence, she lost her interest in the conversation. She stared at the campfire with the little boy in her arms, and slowly her eyes turned watery. The elder, Lu Qing Chen, was still meditating beside the campfire, while on the other side the guards had already fallen asleep. The night in the forest darkened, sometimes the bird chirped at the starry sky on top of them.

Surprisingly Ning Que saw the tears in her eyes, following her sight, he

realized that she was looking at the corpses of the Great Plain barbarians and guards.

Thinking about how she helped the boy clean his nose, seeing now she was feeling sad for the subordinates, Ning Que's impression towards the princess changed again. He thought silently, even though she is an idiot, she is still a nice idiot.

Sang Sang fell asleep on his knee. The only ones who still opened eyes are he and Li Yu. The two people quietly sat, suddenly, the barbarian boy got out from her arms, rubbed his eyes and said he couldn't fall asleep and wanted to hear a story. Li Yu felt embarrassed, thinking that she had already forgotten all the stories she heard during childhood, and how can she tell the romantic stories she heard in adolescent period to a little child?

The barbarian boy did not say a word, but stared aggrievedly at his nominal mother, appeared to be very pitiful. Ning Que smiled, looking at the embarrassed princess, made a cough.

"Wheats are gold and yellow, oats are green....the eggs broke itself one by one, but the biggest egg still had no any movement.....Mother Duck looked at the big and ugly child, looked at him swimming happily in water, said proudly, " See, she is not a horrifying chicken, she is my own child."

"But she is way too ugly. No matter where she went to, she will be judged by everyone. A wild duck says, as long as you don't marry any of the duck in my specie, then it's none of our business."

"One night, when the beautiful sun fell from the west, the ugly duckling sees a flock of birds flying up in the forest. The duckling never saw such pretty things. They have long and soft necks, and white and bright feathers. They are flying to a warm country."

"After a winter, the ugly duckling is surrounded by several swans. She feels ashamed, thinking that she is so ugly, yet the swan kindly pecks her feather...she looks into the pond, suddenly realizing that she is so pretty...Spring comes, sun is very warm, people look at her and start to dance and sing, excitedly yell, "Look! There is a pretty swan!"

Ning Que picked up the scorched firewood, drew randomly lines on the ground, looked down and told a very old story. This story was so simply, yet so sad and happy. The barbarian boy lied on the princess's body, largely opened up his eyes and listened. Li Yu herself also gradually felt fascinated by the story. Sang Sang woke up at a time no one noticed. She heard of it when she was really young, but she still quietly listened to it, having a childish smile on her face.

The night got darker, the children who listened the story eventually went into their dreams. Li Yu remained silent for a really long time, suddenly said, "Your story is too deep, Little Wild won't understand, but I still want to thank you, thank you warning me something...I, like that Mother Duck, will treat him like my own child. He will be my pride. When we return to Chang An, I will never let anyone sneers at him. In the future, whether or not he can fly up like the swan....it depends on himself."

Ning Que rubbed his head and smiled, said, "Actually, I did not think that much. This is a story I told Sang Sang during childhood. She always thought that she was black and ugly, and therefore had low self-esteem. Therefore I made up this story to comfort her."

"No matter what, this is a good story." Li Yu smiled as she looked at him, said, "The ugly Duckling being looked down upon, through her own effort, finally became the lovely and respected swan. This is very encouraging."

Ning Que's hand slightly stiffed, looked at him and said seriously, "You are wrong. This story will only cause lots of people to feel hopeless, because the ugly duckling will never become a swan. She....originally was a swan, like you and your child, but real ugly duckling, forever is an ugly duckling."

Li Yu silently looked at the youngster's face, thinking about these words, faintly realized something.

Chapter 18: The Fault of Your Beauty

The meaningful conversation developed from the fable seemed to throw a rock into the lake of life and sank to the bottom. The two people communicating with each other might seem different at first, but if their social status as the royal princess and the lumberjack in Shu Bi Lake were disregarded then they were just two regular teenagers.

When young people were surrounded by extreme environments such as the depth of a well or a frozen cave, they will usually forget about their status, responsibility, or some other things. They became purer and more innocent under such circumstances. The campfire in the nightly forest of the entrance to the North Mountain that just underwent a bloody battle was one of such setting. Under its influence, the Tang Princess Li Yu and Ning Que were simply an audience and a storyteller.

Since the wounded soldiers around them were sleeping, the voice of the storyteller must be low. To hear the story clearly, the audience needed to be right next to the storyteller. Therefore, they sat next to each other naturally, their shoulders were touching each other, They exchanged some meaningless conversations around the campfire until they felt sleepy.

After a long time, the darkness of night retreated. The stars gave the sky above the tree branches back to the sun, and sound of horses' hoof was heard from the southern North Mountain.

The elder, Lu Qing Chen, and Ning Que opened their eyes at the same time. They looked at each other and woke up the soldiers around them. A barbarian soldier lay on the floor and listened, then raised his right hand and made a sign. He made a fist and shook heavily and then fanned swiftly, telling the group that a mob of heavy riders were coming from the

south.

The campfires were put out. The burnt firewood left behind traces of grey ashes that still lingered a few sparks. The guards and barbarian soldiers struggled to push themselves up and took out the crossbow that they prepared for emergency. The weapons were aimed at the entrance to the North Mountain, which was still dark at the moment. The group could not move quickly because the wounds were too severe for swift movements. Furthermore, they knew the power of heavy riders, it was useless to hide. The only thing they needed to do was to wait patiently - wait to be saved, or to be killed.

The fallen leaves on the North Mountain were blown off by strong gales, and a couple dozens of cavalry rushed out of the gloomy and dimmed forest. The knights and horses were both equipped with thick black heavy armor; the combination of their weight and speed trembled the earth and traveled like thunder. The leftover ashes were vibrated off the ground and created a mist around the camp.

It was the most elite force of Tang Empire, the heavy armored riders!

The calvary covered in heavy armor was unstoppable after they started charging on the battlefield. Even the powerful Sword Masters cannot deal effective damage against these heavy riders.

But the group in the entrance saw the knife marks and arrow holes on the armors of these knights, clearly they got ambushed before arriving; perhaps they were under attack at the southern exit of the North Mountain. Under a situation like this, this group of heavy riders still crossed the North Mountain overnight to reach and give aid to the princess, it was clear they were desperate to protect her safety.

The couple dozen knights rushed out of the entrance and were thirty yards away from the two campfires. The leading young knight wearing a red cloak glanced at the group gathered around the campfire and yelled, "I'm Hua Shan Yue of Gu Mountain Province, where is the princess!"

After hearing the name of Hua Shan Yue, the expressions of the guards holding crossbows relaxed, they answered back loudly. Ning Que lowered his head and looked at Princess Li Yu, who was leaning on his shoulder. Her eyelashes twitched slightly and seemed to almost wake up, Ning Que held back his smile and raised his eyebrows. He quietly put away the yellow hard bow in his left hand.

Just like thunder strikes the horses' hoof stepped over the North Mountain, tearing or ripping the fallen leaves part. The young leader named Hua Shan Yue got off his horse and ran quickly to the campfire and kneeled on one knee. He then raised his two fists to make a gesture, and spoke with his hoarse voice, "Shan Yue was late of aiding and support. My crime is worthy of a thousand death, please forgive my sin, Princess.

Now the couple dozen knights all arrived near the campfire. Fatigue was undoubtedly on the faces of the most elite heavy riders of Tang empire. The riders all got off their horses and kneeled behind Hua Sha Yue and pleaded, "Please forgive our sin, Princess."

Li Yu opened her eyes, it was unclear that if she just woke up or maybe.....she woke up a long time ago.

She looked at the province general of Gu Mountain who was kneeling

before her. Looking at the young general who was loyal to her and looking at the riders who overcame ambushes and battles to get here, her expression was filled with joy and excitement. She smiled and said, "How long are you going to kneel, do you really want me to punish you?"

She was very happy. These Tang calvaries had worried her for days and hurried to the south way of the North Mountain overnight. After a year they finally saw this able and virtuous princess again, how could they not feel excited?

Hua Shan Yue turned his head up excitedly. He was going to say something, but he saw the Princess was lying naturally on a young soldier. Seeing this, his heart tightened up for no reason, his eyes showed a sense of unhappiness and surprise, and his eyebrows frowned.

Ning Que, who paid attention to the heavy riders, saw the young general's face as he turned his head up. It is a handsome face, with the eyebrows extended upward like two swords, adding some heroic manner to him.

At such young age, he was already a province general at Gu Mountain Province, leading a regiment of heavy riders. Hua Shan Yue no doubt is one of the contemporary Tang's most outstanding character, possessing great shrewdness.

However, in his life, he could never pass one threshold. He fell on this threshold hard several years ago -- this threshold had been always buried in his heart, yet the entire Tang had known his love.

It was the heaviest and hottest love to Tang's fourth Princess Li Yu

highness.

Hua Shan Yue's sudden cold feeling, obvious was not towards Li Yu, he was not dared to show any disrespect to the princess even if he had to die -- he was just very disliked the young soldier standing next to the princess. Who did he think he was, how dare did he to get so close to the noble princess, actually not close, but touched!!

He never got close to the princess even once in his life. He had never enjoyed such nice treatment, if possible he would take out his knife and chop off that young soldier's shoulder!

Hua Shan Yue hide his jealous very well. At least in front of the princess he would hide it well, so Li Yu only saw a temporary unhappiness and surprise in his eyes.

She was surprised, then felt the warmth coming from her arm, eventually understood where the young general's strange feelings came from. Subconsciously, she lifted her hand to neaten her hair in order to hide her embarrassment -- she did not even think it herself that, she already lied on Ning Que's shoulder for a night. Even though it happened in a special condition, but to Tang's princess, having such intimate interaction with a young man was certainly not right.

Princess Li Yu slowly stood up.

Thereby, the maid eager to hear stories no longer existed.

The remaining heat on the two people's shoulders were blown away

quickly by the morning wind.

Remained silent for a while, Ning Que shook his head and smiled, looked towards her side face, suddenly he felt that she looked much more lovely than before.

Coldness and arrogance obviously were not as beautiful as calmness and grace.

However, he still thought that the girl looked the prettiest when she was sitting by the firewoods.

Chapter 19 There is nothing in the mountain of snow

Hua Shan Yue looked around the forest, noticing the corpses of both guards and enemies. Looking at the blood and traces of battle, especially after seeing that thin handle-less little sword, he finally understood how horrifying the assassin was, his feeling changed involuntarily.

He asked the subordinate to get a horse ready, said, "Princess, the reinforcing troop was already on its way, we should leave as soon as possible."

Princess Li Yu nodded her head, agreed to his arrangement, walking away under the protection of the heavy riders.

Hua Shan Yue then gave a cold glance at Ning Que. Looking at him indifferently, he was guessing the real relationship between this young soldier and the princess. However, no matter how hard he thought he could not see any potential from the youngster to threaten him, so his sight became indifferent.

The indifference hidden in his vision actually consisted of multiple probability. Ning Que understood this point very clearly. He quietly looked at Hua Shan Yue's shadow, remembering this person's previous warmth in his vision, understanding that he would not do any harm to the princess, yet his desire to possess the princess was way too strong.

Young general's drastic love for the princess, honestly, had nothing to do with Ning Que, who was only a low rank soldier. However, Ning Que really disliked Hua Shan Yue's indifferent attitude. He knew that this indifference represented strong power and background, represented

contempt.

Ning Que disliked, so he stood up, looked at the woman who was about to get on horseback, smiled and said, "Princess highness, actually since the beginning in Wei City, I had always wanted to say something to you..."

Hua Shan Yue suddenly looked back. The pretty princess sitting on the white horse frowned and turned back, silently staring at the young soldier standing by the firewood, seemed about to scold, but ended up saying indifferently, "Tell me when we returned to Chang An."

Before marching on, Hua Shang Yue whispered with the head of guards for a while, understanding what princess had encountered, and knowing what Ning Que did in yesterday's assassin. He remained silent for a while, then walked to Ning Que and said calmly, "You made great contributions this time, there would be awards to you when we got back to Chang An....Little kid, nice job."

Ning Que took Sang Sang to the shabby tribe and started to pack up.

Sang Sang fastened the big black umbrella back to her back, suddenly turned her head up, frowned and asked Ning Que, "Master, did you say 'you have something to say' on purpose?"

"Yeah." Ning Que cleaned his knife, replied, "The guy called Hua Shan Yue was too hypocritical and too boring, I would have a bad mood when looking at him, so I have to give him a bad mood too."

"Master, what were you going to tell the princess?" Sang Sang stopped what she was doing, asked curiously.

"How would I know?" Ning Que push in his knife into the sheath, shrugged his shoulder, said, "No matter what I can't say, since the beginning when I saw you in the Wei City, I deeply and enthusiastically fell in love on you....."

"But Hua Shan Yue may think that way, princess...may believe that you want to say this too."

"Idiots think in idiots' way. I am not surprised." Ning Que answered.

The little maid looked at his eyes, said, "Don't you think that you are really boring sometimes?"

Ning Que shrugged his shoulder, accepting the comment.

Sang Sang shook her head, looking at him after a few seconds, said, "Master, is it true that, in your eyes, everyone else besides you is an idiot?"

Ning Que thought seriously as as he fastened the handle of his knife. He thought for a long time, then replied seriously, "This is not my problem. It's just that in this world, there are always many idiots doing stupid things. People like Hua Shan Yue are not supposed to count as an idiot, yet since he actually believes in love, then he is also an idiot."

Sang Sang pointed at herself with her finger, asked seriously, "So in your eyes, am I also an idiot?"

Ning Que looked at this black little face, answered seriously, "You are not idiot, you are just silly."

Before the group left the entry to the way of North Mountain, a little scene happened.

Some of the Gu Mountain Province cavalries stayed at the place. The assassins who dared to murder Tang princess would definitely not leave any traces, so they were not staying to find evidences, but rather to protect these corpses of soldiers. When the reinforced troop came, they would move the corpses back to Chang An and bury them - - no matter dead or alive, they can't abandon not even one comrade, this is Tang's military rule.

They carefully juxtaposed the soldiers' corpses in the forest. On the other hand, they left the enemies' corpses randomly on the ground, preparing to burn them into ashes. When they were going to burn the corpse of the mid-aged scholar, they felt hesitated. They knew that he was a Great Sword Master, so they were not sure if they should show him respect corresponding to his identity.

Hua Shan Yue slight frowned, deciding to bury this Great Sword Master. Yet at this point, the old man Lu Qing Chen whispered to them, "This person already fell into Demonism."

Hearing the word Demonism, the young general's face suddenly became cold. When he looked at the corpse again, there was no more respect in his eyes, but only contempt. He waved his hand like waving a fly away, said, "Throw it out and burn it."

.....

In the morning they moved out of the exit of the way of North Mountain, and at noon they encountered the big reinforced troop. Under the protection of hundreds of elite heavy riders, Tang's fourth princess Li Yu continued moving towards the capital Chang An. At this point, no matter enemies inside or outside the empire could threaten her.

The days that followed, Li Yu and the barbarian prince had always stayed inside the wagon, and never appeared in the public.

Even though there were hundreds of cavalries, the guards who survived and Great Plain barbarians insisted to protecting the surrounding of the wagon, regardless of their wounded body. The elder Lu Qing Chen was at the second wagon. The heavily wounded guards and barbarians were at the wagons behind. As for Ning Que and his little maid Sang Sang, they were sitting on their own shabby wagon, far behind the others.

At the boundary of Gu Mountain province, all the heavy riders changed to light riders, so the group sped up suddenly. The solid wagons in the front could follow up, but Ning Que's wagon could only barely keep up.

One cavalry ride near their wagon scolded angrily, "Your speed is way too slow, speed up!"

Like the first few days when they just left the Wei City, Ning Que appeared to be sleepy again. Looking like he would fall at any time, entirely depending on Sang Sang to laboriously carry him up. Hearing the furious scolding for the cavalry, he opened up his eyes and glanced at

him, without speaking a word.

Looking at the view of the cavalry's back, Sang Sang wiped out the sweats on her forehead, squinting her willow-like eyes, said, "Master, we seem to be abandoned."

"Good usage of the word 'abandoned,' if use 'being forgotten,' it will sound pretentious and showy."

Ning Que looked at the wagon in the most front, thought about the princess highness who never showed up again, smiled and said, "To us, the poor people who need to gamble with lives to live, any type of pretentious and showy expressions are nasty."

Sitting with a princess by the firewood and telling a night of fable, such image, no matter at Chang An or the Great Plain, appeared to be fantastic and imaginative; such image was the real fable. It's not real.

A little frontier soldier, occasionally rescued a noble by chance. Later on, he received corresponding awards, then they never interact anymore, this is the story of the real world.

In this world, there are heroic epics, yet there are not that many fables. If Romeo was not a noble's son, but simply a garbage man, presumably Juliet will think ten times more before she dies for him.

Ning Que always had a clear understanding of such things. He knew that the hidden face of the girl by the firewood was only dream like picture. More importantly, he had never really loved, but only appreciated

the fact that she could also have such beautiful moment, so he did not really feel upset or disappointed.

After resupplying in Gu Mountain Province, the group did not rest for a moment. The princess was clearly in a hurry to head back to Chang An, where her lovely and caring father lived. They chose to travel directly south for the fastest route.

Hua Shan Yue did not misinterpret Ning Que's relationship with the princess because he investigated Ning Que's background and found out that he was just a regular soldier in a borderline city, nothing could ever happen between the two. Therefore Ning Que was not trouble during his stay at the Gu Mountain Province.

After setting up the camps to rest, Sang Sang went to a nearby river to wash the rice and clean up the fish. She made a big meal for dinner. The young master and the young maid took the main dish into their bowls and started eating happily. They did not stop until they were filled content and joyful.

A cold and harsh looking man walked by them and saw this scene, he shook his head and smiled, "We asked you guys to eat with us but you didn't. We thought you were resenting us, but now I see you just find our food quite lacking..... It is your previous life's fortune that you can get a hardworking maid like this."

Comparing Sang Sang to a fortune of previous life was certainly an exaggerated compliment. But Sang Sang did not say anything, she just

smiled and continued eating while Ning Que felt that it was obvious she was his precious gem.

The name of the incoming man was Peng Guo Tao, he was princess's trusted guard leader who performed decisively and bravely in the bloody battle of North Mountain. He brought his subordinates and followed the princess into the Great Plain for a year, and encountered several ambushes when returning home. Out of all of his loyal subordinates, only seven of them remain alive; for sure this guard leader's current feeling was complicated and hurt.

Ning Que and him were partners who overcame the threats of death in the North Mountain entrance. Relationships blossomed from blood and glory were usually more reliable than normal ones, and Ning Que's performance during the battle will definitely be engraved into the memories of the soldiers presented.

This was the reason why the carriage disliked by the knights of Gu Mountain Province often welcomed in Peng Guo Tao and other guards as guests recently. The few barbarian soldiers also sent some strong alcohol to Ning Que and Sang Sang as gifts, but they rarely step anywhere closer to them than a ten yards radius. they avoided speaking to the master and the maid whenever they can. Perhaps they were scared of the story told in Shu Bi Lake.

"I know your backgrounds are certainly clean without problems, and you guys are probably not comfortable traveling with the unit of heavy riders. But there was no reply after submitting your request," Peng Guo Tao looked at Ning Que and apologized, "You are a soldier sent from Wei City, you cannot leave unless the princess gives out the order."

Ning Que scratched his head and said, "Then I'll follow the group for a while longer."

Ning Que expected the rest of the trip to Chang An to be calm and boring without any events, but the night after, Ning Que suddenly received an invitation from the other carriage. The elder, Lu Qing Chen, wanted to see him.

Ning Que was both surprised and happy, he tried to think for a long time, but decided to let it be. He put out the campfire next to his carriage and walked towards the other carriage with Sang Sang.

The curtain was lifted, the dim candle shined its light around the carriage. The psychic master Lu Qing Chen looked at Ning Que and the young maid bowed towards him respectfully. He was surprised, he expected the youngster to understand the reason that he invited him to his carriage. Wouldn't Ning Que be worried that he won't enlighten him when there was a third person present?

Then the elder remembered the story he heard around the campfire at the entrance to North Mountain. The story that he wanted to listen to even when he was meditating... the story of a boy and girl struggling to survive in the vast and dangerous Min Mountain. Lu Qing Chen thought he realized the reason Ning Que brought Sang Sang along with him, therefore he was pleased and favored Ning Que even more.

In reality, Ning Que wasn't really thinking. Bringing Sang Sang along with him to anywhere was just a deep-rooted habit of his.

The two hands of the elder crossed each other above his knees. He spoke warmly, "You know the reason I wanted you here."

Ning Que was silent. he pressed his left hand onto his right hand's back, and put them both onto the ground. His two knees were on the ground, and he bowed slowly until his forehead touched the back of his left hand. It was the most sincere gesture in Tang Empire.

A sincere gesture only came after a great favor. Although Lu Qing Chen did not do anything yet, and most likely wasn't able to help him because xiuxing was a world only those who were qualified can enter, Ning Que still thanked him. Only people like Ning Que who memorized the entire Extreme Sense but still couldn't find the Way can realize the sympathy and grace of a xiuxingist to help enlighten a regular person who did not have the quality to xiuxing.

Sang Sang did not understand the action of her young master, but after watching Ning Que bowed the sincere gesture, she also followed his actions and kneel before the elder.

Lu Qing Chen observed this scene and smiled while brushing his beard. He lifted Ning Que up and concentrated his mind. The elder closed his eyes and place his two hands against Ning Que's chest and back of the waist. A moment later, the warm candle light in the carriage became blurry, almost like countless dust started to swirl around in the air swiftly.

There was a dead silence, and time past without people realizing.

The dim and blurry candle light started to become clear and strong

again. The elder gradually took back his hands and looked at Ning Que, whose hands were shaking because he was trying to suppress his expectations and wonderment, then sighed lightly.

“There is a breath between heaven and earth, and that breath is the so-called ki. Xiuxingist are able to detect the presence of ki because they have a strong mind that can sense it. Therefore the ability to xiuxing all depends on your strength of mind, and whether or not you can detect the presence of ki.”

“I observed you back in Wei city, and discovered that there is not a single motion of ki in your body. Today I thoroughly checked inside your body, and I was right, your Mountain of Ki and Sea of Soul is empty.”

“.....There is nothing in it.”

Chapter 20: Two and Three Leaves of Peach Flowers are just Illusions

After hearing this, Ning Que remained silent for a really long time before he looked up to the old man. He raised up his right hand and pointed his index finger to his temple, like using a arrow to commit suicide, queried seriously, "Psychic Power, or spirit, isn't it formed in the brain?"

The old man Lu Qing Chen looked at him kindly and answered slowly, "Such saying is not really incorrect. However, even though Psychic Power formed from the brain, how does it connect and interact with the Qi of nature outside of the body?"

"The so called Xiu Xing, is to keep mental power in the Mountain of Qi in the front chest, and the Sea of Qi in the back waist. The Mountain and Sea of Qi are surrounded by seventeen acupoints of Qi, like the holes in the Zhong Li Mountain that allow the movement of wind and flow of water, that corresponds to the Sea and the Mountain of Qi, thereby allowing you to communicate with the nature."

"The inner organs and acupoints of Qi within people's body are inborn. No matter how you Xiu Xing, you can't change it. Therefore there is a saying that, the so called Xiu Xing ... is simply taking back the present gifted from the Heaven."

"I observed your seventeen acupoints of Qi surrounding the Mountain and Sea of Qi, eleven of them are inaccessible. So no matter which stage your Psychic Power is, you can't interact with the nature."

"However, you don't have to feel disappointed. There are billions of

people, it's already really rare for one to have even thirteen accessible acupoints of Qi. So your body is just as common as others...."

The old man consoled softly but Ning Que looked down and gave a bitter smile.

In Wei City, he had consoled himself for countless times telling himself that only the real geniuses can Xiu Xing. Now his saying is confirmed. According to such saying, the elites who had fifteen or sixteen accessible acupoints of Qi were really favored by the Heaven, like one walking on the street and suddenly see gold raining down.

"Why did I not have such fortune?"

He sighed in his heart, thanked the elder sincerely, then walked out of the wagon with Sang Sang.

The light inside the wagon was dull. After some time had passed, the curtain was being opened up again, the Tang's fourth princess Li Yu sat in front of the old man, asked, "Is there really no possibility at all?"

It's true that Lu Qing Chen really liked Ning Que, but for a Psychic Master who already went to the Seethrough Stage to waste his Psychic Power to observe Ning Que's body obviously needed other reasons, such as the princess's command.

"The people who have solid and pure spirit, usually can obtain strong Psychic Power through meditation. Ning Que is undoubted such a person, so I originally had some expectations on him too, thinking that

maybe he only has ten accessible acupoints of Qi, is at the edge to Xiu Xing. Yet unfortunately there are eleven inaccessible acupoints of Qi inside his body. Heaven does not favor him, so no matter how outstanding his potential is, there is no use."

The old man felt very disappointed and unfortunate as well. He thought that if Ning Que can Xiu Xing, even if he only had ten accessible acupoints of Qi, the worst talent, because of his personality and excellent handwriting, he would have a bright future. Unfortunately, the youngster had a bad luck.

"If so, then don't waste any energy anymore." Li Yu looked tired due to the continual hurried journey, she looked down and pondered for a while, said calmly, "Sorry for giving you more work because of this thing, I should not have told you to do so."

Old man Lu Qing Chen's white eyebrows raised up slowly, looking quietly at the princess. He understood that the previous words had already decided Ning Que's future. After knowing that Ning Que did not have the ability to Xiu Xing, she stopped thinking about training and cultivating Ning Que.

The old man remained silent for a while then advised, "There are so many elites in Chang An, maybe youngsters like Ning Que is not so special, but I believe that after several years, this young man will become Tang's most outstanding soldier."

Li Yu never expected the old man to have such high evaluation on Ning Que. Her eyebrows frowned, explained softly, "The youngster's fighting skill and personality are all really good. If he is still in Wei City, or as long as he stays in the army, I will do my best to make him serve for me, yet

now he chooses to take the entrance exam to the Academy. Since he chooses the path to become a government officer, it will take him decades to climb high enough to influence the court. At that time we both are both old already, then what's the point?"

The elder remained silent for a long time, then suddenly he opened his mouth and said, "Normally he wouldn't be able to xiuxing because only six acupoints of qi are open in his body out of the the total of seventeen, but..... there is no set destiny under the Mandate of Heaven."

"My understanding of the Way is still too low. But the Academy that he wants to enter is a magical place filled with miracles. In the future, if..... I'm just saying if he is able to enter the Second Floor of the Academy, then who knows what kind of miracle will land upon him. Perhaps he will be able to enter the way of xiuxing?"

"The Second Floor?" Li Yu shook her head and said, "How many people in this world is able to enter the Second Floor of the Academy? Although Ning Que isn't too bad, your confidence in him seems to be overwhelming.

Lu Qing Chen looked at her and smiled, "Just a moment earlier Your Grace said that he is able to enter the Academy and become a court official after he graduates. Everyone knows the difficulty of the entrance exam of the Academy, but you still had confidence in him. Who knows that this soldier from the borderline city won't in the future.....climb up to that Second Floor?"

Li Yu was stunned for a moment, she didn't know how to answer the question from the elder. After thinking thoroughly, she actually never had thought that Ning Que would fail the entrance exam to the hardest

school in this world. Where did her confidence come from? Was it from the stories she heard around the campfire or the calm expression on the youngster's face when he jumped through the wall of fire into the battle?

She instinctively looked out of the carriage's window and watched Ning Que and Sang Sang's shadow passed by as they walked around the campfire. She fell silent once again.

Ning Que knew his personality and strong will was suited for xiuxing, but he wasn't qualified. In fact he was used to been treated as a precious material for the way of xiuxing but then been behind left in dust because his acupoints of qi weren't clear. Seven years ago when he met his dark faced friend and his master in the Eastern Min Mountain he was treated as such, and two years ago when he was checked out by the military because he obtained an army medal, he was disappointed again.

If he was able to enter the way of xiuxing, he did not need to struggle to kill all the bandits to earn military contribution to get a permission for the entrance exam to the Academy. Just by using the achievements he made in Wei City he would be a major character to be brought up by the entire military force of Tang Empire.

Since Ning Que was expecting bad news, he didn't feel so bad after hearing it. But Lu Qing Chen was the only powerful xiuxingist he encountered, so he still had a little bit of hope left. But that hope was just like the two or three leaves of peach flowers hiding in the corner of the garden. It was all an illusion.

Just when he was ready to cheer up and gave up his illusions, the elder once again invited him to the carriage while he was practicing his knife combats at the second night.

This time Sang Sang did not follow him. Perhaps the princess missed the time when she chatted with the maid during the trip, or that child barbarian prince missed Sang Sang, anyway Sang Sang was summoned to the princess's carriage.

"My conclusion couldn't be wrong because I believe you memorized the entire book of Extreme Senses by heart, but you still couldn't sense the presence of the qi of nature." The elder smiled and looked at him.

Ning Que scratched his head and smiled bitterly, "Sir, I'm sure the reason you invited me today wasn't to scold me again."

"After you travel to Chang An you will be taking the exam to enter the Academy. I'm old now so I will probably stay at the princess's palace to rest and meditate. It will be hard for us to reunite, so I wanted to chat with you." Lu Qing Chen looked at him kindly, "I know of regular people's interest and wonder in the way of xiuxing. Although you aren't able to enter the Way, but maybe there are some things you want to know."

"I have a lot of things that I want to know." Ning Que answered honestly.

Chapter 21 There is no rule on the path to Xiu Xing

Old man Lu Qing Chen smiled and asked, "What do you want to know?"

Ning Que thought seriously for a long time "I want to know....what is Xiu Xing."

Lu Qing Chen laughed, "You're really greedy."

Ning Que did not feel embarrassed "So...can you tell me how many stages there are in Xiu Xing, do different stages have different abilities?"

"You surprise me again." Old man Lu Qing Chen smiled and said, "Even though common people don't really understand such things clearly, they are not actual secrets."

"They are not actual secrets to xiu xingist but they are still secrets to the common people." Ning Que laughed and answered, "I will keep the secrets for you."

"Fine." Lu Qing Chen laughed out loud, pausing for a while then asked, "do you know the Great Sky Way?"

Ning Que, looking at this Xiu Xingist from the South Gate in the Great Sky Way, nodded his head.

"I am from the South Gate in the Great Sky Way. I was ordered to travel around the world. The commoners usually call us Precedents. Therefore, if

you want to know things related to Xiu Xing, I will begin with the Great Sky Way."

"The Great Sky Way worships Heaven. It is the only legal religion in the world. Because Heaven favors the world, all beings can breathe in Qi. The Qi that I am talking about is basically the Qi of nature, so everything begins from Heaven."

"Human is only one type of animal. They were originally ignorant until Heaven gave them enlightenment. They began to understand nature. Then they used mental powers to control the Qi, doing mysterious things. This is called Xiu Xing."

"The path of Xiu Xing is really long, complex, and harsh. It requires strong spirit. Therefore, we split the path into five segments or the five stages you referred to."

"The primary stage is called First Vision, meaning that Xiu Xingists can extend their mental powers outside of the Sea and Mountain of Qi, realizing the existence of Qi in nature."

"The second stage is called sensation . At this stage, Xiu Xingists can touch the Qi of nature flowing around the world, and live harmoniously with it. They can even do some communications with the Qi."

"The third stage is called doubtless, referring to Xiu Xingists who already have a simple understanding of the pattern of Qi's flow and how to use it. The so called Sword Masters and Charmists are in this stage."

(Sword Masters and Charmists are what commoners refer to xiuxingists that belong to the third stage because they don't understand the system of xiuxing. Once they go to the 4th stage they have separate names like charmists named by the commoners => great Charmists)

"The fourth stage is called Seethrough. The Xiu Xingists who entered this stage can fuse their spirit with the Qi of nature. To Psychic Masters, this means they can attack enemies directly with their mental power. Staying at this stage for a long time will allow them to do some extremely mysterious things."

"Youngster, don't look at me like that. I am in the Seethrough stage but I barely entered the stage and I am already so old. Now I am about to die. I probably don't have a chance to experience and study further into the stage. Otherwise...it wouldn't have been that difficult to kill a Great Sword Master."

The light in the wagon was really dull, maybe it lacked oil or maybe not. The old man Lu Qing Chen laughed as he spoke, then he looked down to his left leg, sighing on how fast he aged, time never waits.

"The fifth stage is called Fate Seeker."

"The so called Fate Seeker, is simply seeking fate."

"The Xiu Xingists entered this stage not only understood the Qi's pattern from the surface, but also figured out the basis on how way the Qi flows. They understand the connection between Heaven and nature, the ultimate source of the world. Probably, only the people who reached this stage are considered to have learned the Way."

Ning Que was fascinated by these stuffs, realizing that the old man had finished speaking, he immediately raised his hand and asked, "Sir, is there higher any stage after the five stages?"

"Why do you think so?" Lu Qing Chen looked at him interested.

He replied, "If Xiu xing is really a long path, then this path must have no end. In fact, there are no inaccessible ways in this world, so I believe there must be higher stages."

"You, who can't even enter the Primary stage, gave me the impression that you would be disappointed and had given up. I didn't expect you be still interested in the way."

Hearing the old man's friendly teasing, Ning Que laughed even more innocently "Maybe that is because I am studious."

"I never saw a man who was more studious than perverts." Lu Qing Chen smiled.

(It is suppose to be a play on words because in chinese perverts and studious person are very close to pronunciation so Lu Qing Chen is teasing Ning Que, but alas the there is only so much we can do about these language difference...)

Ning Que complimented the elder's phrase in his heart and then edited the sentence, "Then it wouldn't be studious, but rather curious."

Lu Qing Chen thought silently for a while, and then he rose his head

and looked at Ning Que, "According to myths there are many miraculous stages above Fate Seeker, but there were only two of such stages appeared in the historical record. One of them is Godsend, and the other is Boundless."

"The so called Godsend stage indicates that the xiuxingist is able to listen to the message of the Heaven directly and use Divine Sorcery by absorbing the Heavenly Light. Think about this - to be able to use the enormous amount of Heavenly Light that is present throughout the world and enchant it into one's body, you can imagine how powerful and mysterious Godsend is."

Ning Que was picturing the elder's description in his head. A man wearing a silky white robe kneeled before the vast sky, a moment later a flash of light came down from heaven and torn the misty cloud apart. Imagining such power was able to move clouds and shake mountains, Ning Que's heart started beating faster. He spoke again, but his voice was hoarse for some reason.

"Boundless.....what kind of stage is that?"

"The said stage did appear in a historical record, but it wasn't a vivid description. There was only one sentence: The heart is the limit."

Lu Qing Chen wrinkled his eyebrows slightly, but his facial expression remained calm as usual. He continued, "My prediction is that the xiuxingists who were able to reach the stage of Boundless were able to teleport thousands of miles away with just one thought.....How impressive is that!"

'The heart is the limit'Ning Que was moved deeply by the sentence, but what limit was it talking about? limit of distance or rules?

Faintly he captured a certain meaning of the word Boundless, but he didn't think it was impressive like the elder, but rather carefree and limitless.

"The Academy should have more records about the stage of Boundless."

Lu Qing Chen looked at Ning Que's smooth complexion and signed, "Xiuxingists who were able to reach these two stages were for sure Saints. Although an ancient phrase said that every one thousand year a Saint will descent into the world, but who knew for how many years there hasn't been a Saint born into this world. Therefore these.....are just legends and myths, don't think too much about them."

Ning Que bowed again to show that he appreciated the elder's teaching.

The elder laughed, "I thought you were going to ask who are the famous great xiuxingists in the world and where were the hidden masters located. It seemed like youngsters like you would be interested in those things but I never expected you to ask me these questions."

Ning Que's two hands were holding his knees.He remained silent for a long time then raised his head and replied sincerely, "Knowing who are the strongest xiuxingists in the world means nothing to me. They are the eagles flying high in the sky, while I'm the ant struggling to move on the ground. In their eyes, I don't exist, therefore they shouldn't be in my view

either."

"Then.....why did you ask about the basic information of xiuxing?" The elder was surprised.

Ning Que replied, "Those great xiuxingists wouldn't appear in my life for now, but after I enter Chang An I will probably encounter some regular xiuxingists. For example, that great sword master who dressed like a scholar in a green robe. Since I don't have the potential to xiuxing, I need to know what is xiuxing and understand their way of combat...."

"And what is your goal?" The elder raised his white eyebrows, he showed great interest in Ning Que's answer.

Ning Que lowered his head and smiled, then raised his head to reply, "If in the future I need to fight against xiuxingists, the things you taught me today will aid me greatly and help me obtain victory."

"A regular person is able to fight against xiuxingist who can use the ki of nature and you want to defeat them?"

The elder stared into Ning Que's eyes and asked repeatedly. Suddenly his eyebrows shook violently and a laughter bursted out of his old and fragile body, "Hah Hah Hah Hah!"

The laughter died out slowly, and the elder looked at Ning Que who was embarrassed. He smiled and said, "Challenging, I like it."

Chapter 22 Learning on the journey

It was already very dark outside when Ning Que walked out of the wagon. Lu Qing Chen lifted up the curtain, looking at the youngster's shadow, listening to the frontier ditty faintly coming from the field and smiled.

As a Xiu Xingist who just entered the Seethrough Stage, he was practically a beginner. Having entered the Seethrough Stage is enough for him to be extremely respected by any country at any city. He didn't have to communicate with people and be humble. Psychic Master needed more time to meditate than others so to Lu Qing Chen time was money.

However, he would still like to spend an extra night or a few to chat with Ning Que, talking about seemingly pointless things. This is because he really liked Ning Que. He liked the youngster's calmness and self-esteem hidden under his immature appearance and his bold and generous characteristic that was revealed occasionally. Boldness, generosity, self-esteem, and calmness are Tang people's most admirable personalities and old man Lu Qing Chen is an indigenous Tang civilian.

Tonight the things he told Ning Que were the entry lesson to the North Gate of the Great Sky Way. Even though they were not considered top secrets, they were still not open to commoners but he still revealed it because he believed in one thing:

"I will always believe that you will be a great Xiu Xingist in the future."

Although he knew that Ning Que's acupoints of Qi were inaccessible and that there is no way for him to Xiu Xing, the old man still had no doubt. He just believed that the youngster can get on the path that he was currently walking himself and he wished for this youngster to walk far and stable.

The old man looked at the view of Ning Que's back "It took me almost my whole life before I started to carelessly follow my instincts, maybe maybe this is Heaven's enlightenment to me."

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Back to the Shabby tribe, Sang Sang had already returned. Ning Que asked Sang Sang the reason that the princess had invited her to the carriage. Unsurprised he received an unclear answer. He was used to the maid's laziness for remembering events. Ning Que teased her jokingly and then the two drank a few cups before they fell asleep.

The next day, the carriages continued to advance toward Chang An under the protection of the heavy riders but the days that passed weren't as boring for the young master and the maid as they were before.

Before dusk, the elder would invite Ning Que to talk in the carriage. The princess would also often invite Sang Sang to her carriage to chat. Luckily Peng Guo Tao sent a guard to drive the carriage or Ning Que would have to autopilot the horses of the carriages.

During the conversations in the cart, Ning Que learned more about xiuxing. For example xiuxingist used their mind power to control the ki of nature and how xiuxingists were able to use certain items to reinforce the

connection between their body and the world. He also learned how swordmasters were able to use their spiritual power to compress the qi into a shapeless string and control the sharp handleless flying sword.

There were no specific requirements for the items that can help reinforce the connection between the xiuxingist and nature. Xiuxingists of the Great Sky Way often use wooden swords, Buddhism normally use prayer beads and wooden fish. Talismans and flying swords were common equipments of xiuxingist. Sometimes the great xiuxingists would use strange items such as staffs or brush pens.

Wooden fish = not literally wooden fish. It is those wooden instruments that monks use to hit with a small stick. Chinese temple block is the name that can also be referred to. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wooden_fish for more details.

"The people, who use mental power to put Qi into talismans, are the charmists."

Old man Lu Qing Chen held a cup of tea and spoke slowly as he leaned on the window.

"Wait, wait, wait, are you kidding me? Then what if I put Qi of nature in a toilet? What do I call that? Toilet master?"

As they chatted, the elder and the youngster naturally got familiar with each other. As a result, Ning Que gradually revealed his lazy and impolite side. He was biting a brush pen with one side dipped in ink, waving his right arm, to show his strong doubt.

The old man put down the cup, staring widely at the youngster and criticized, "It's the convention. Don't you understand what convention is? We used these names for tens of thousands years, what's the problem? Convention means easy to remember. Stop caring about those literal stuffs!"

"Fine." Ning Que could not argue against the tens of thousands of years of convention. He continued to take notes on the shaking wagon.

"Now let's talk about Xiu Xingists' fighting methods. What Sword Master specialize in is sword techniques. Charmist specializes in talisman techniques, and what I, a Psychic Master, specializes in is psychic techniques. However, it's really hard to categorize the fighting methods of the Xiu Xingists who entered the Fate Seeker stage. I had heard that some of them practice divine spells.... I don't know much about the more specific info."

(TL Note: The names of the techniques may sound clichéd or like so unconventional... but the author wanted to have the names of the ways of fighting to sound stupid)

"These names.....sound childish." Ning Que's facial expression became somewhat rigid, biting the tail of the brush pen, looking at the old man "Feel like they all, in general, can be called sorcerers, and what they use are simply sorceries."

Old man's white eyebrow suddenly frowned tightly and looked at him sternly "The problem is, how would you define the word sorcery?"

Ning Que, who lost his argument again, shrugged his shoulder to show

innocence.

“Besides the above Xiu Xingists, the most common Xiu Xingists in the world are Fight Masters. They are not that good in sensing the Qi of nature but they are still good in fighting. When Fight Masters fight, they can juxtapose Qi throughout their body like wearing a layer of heavy armor. When they practice Xiu Xing, they will use Qi to stimulate their own body and blood, in order to build up an iron body.”

“Is the giant guy at the way of North Mountain a Fight Master?”

“Correct but that guy’s stage was not very high. The four Great Generals in our Tang Empire all are top level Fight Masters. Arrows may stab through their armors but they can’t break through the guarding Qi around their body. Even if the arrows were really sharp that they could break the guarding Qi, the arrows will not be able to deal any damage to their iron body. To such elites, no matter how good your archery skills are, it’s no use.”

Hearing these words, Ning Que’s brain automatically thought up of the two words Xia Hou. He looked down to take notes with a calm expression but in his heart, he was constantly thinking about methods to fight against such elites.

“Yet if you choose to combat these elites in close range fighting, then you are committing suicide. You may have lots of strength but comparing to them it’s like a mouse trying to beat a lion. Even if you use your full power, you can’t even push them back. Yet they only have to move their fingers and they can easily twist off your neck.”

"What if I put Qi on the arrows...will they damage the Fight Masters?" Ning Que suddenly lifted his head and asked seriously.

The old man pondered for a while then slowly shook his head "Xiu Xingists will rarely attempt to put Qi on the arrows because arrows are different from swords. In order to keep the speed, they have to be really light. Therefore, they can be influenced by environment easily. And you can't really carve talisman on it either because Qi attached on the arrows dissipates too fast...Of course, if anyone can solve the Qi dissipating problem, then arrows obviously can be an extremely terrifying long ranged attacking method."

Ning Que looked as if he was absorbed in thought.

Chapter 23 I thought you knew my talent.....

"Everyone says that in Chang An, battle masters are everywhere. Sword masters can be spotted at every corner of the city. Obviously, this saying is exaggerated but it is still the capital of the empire; the number one place in the world. Obviously there are many hidden elites and xiuxingists. At Chang An, no one will hurt you in the Academy but outside of the Academy, you should speak and act cautiously."

"Yes." Ning Que replied, then asked, "Sir, are there any elites in Chang An.....that I should watch out for?"

Lu Qing Chen glanced at the youngster, sneered, "Who was the one who said he did not want to know these things a few nights ago?"

Ning Que laughed and rubbed the back of his head.

"It's meaningless to say them." Lu Qing Chen laughed and shook his head. "You only need to remember, although there are many factions of xiuxingists. All in all, the major ones are Daoism, Buddhism, Demonism, and the Academy. Buddhism is usually located in strange places. Taoism has many temples all over the world. Demonism is best not mentioned. Taoism is the Great Sky Way. A countless number of formidable xiuxingist originates from there each generation. They were respected and praised highly by every royal family of the common world. If you heard of the Heavenly Empire of Xi Ling, then you would know that he is the main foundation of the Great Sky Way."

"Respected and praised by all royal families? Did the Tang empire share the same attitude toward the Great Sky Way?" Ning Que asked while

wrinkling his eyebrows.

Lu Qing Chen laughed bitterly. As the strongest force in the world, Tang was the only royal family that did not need to bow down to the Great Sky Way and the Great Sky Way couldn't do anything about it. But as a Tang citizen practicing in the Great Sky Way, the elder had an embarrassing situation.

"What about Demonism? What is so great about xiuxingists that are from Demonism?" Ning Que noticed the embarrassment in the elder's expression so he quickly changed the topic. "Speaking of which, you said the great sword master in the entrance to the North Mountain was using Demonic techniques. I don't understand what kinds of techniques are considered Demonic techniques."

Hearing the word "Demonism", Lu Qing Chen's expression turned serious and solemn, "Do not take note of this and do not tell this to others when you are outside."

"Yes, sire."

"No matter which faction you are from: Taoism, Buddhism, or the Academy, the xiuxingists from the righteous factions always sense the presence of the ki of nature, and reach harmony with them. To be specific, controlling ki is basically using the forces of nature."

Lu Qing Chen closed his eyes slightly. He seemed like he was remembering something from the past, "But the way of Demonism is different from all other factions. They forcefully absorb the ki of nature into their body!"

"What.....what is wrong with it?" Ning Que thought about it for a while, but could not find any fault in this kind of practice. It seemed easier and more direct than the other techniques.

"Do not speak so foolishly. If you were to comment so lightly on Demonic techniques in the Academy or the Great Sky Way, then you would be expelled from the faction or face even harsher punishments."

Lu Qing Chen warned Ning Que, "The human body is as weak as ants compare to the heaven and earth. To be able to store the spiritual power inside the sea of soul is already using the body to its maximum capacity. How can the flesh of human be sustained after forcefully absorbing the ki of nature in addition to that? There is only one result: death from explosion just like the great sword master in the entrance of the North Mountain."

"But Demonism is a faction....." Ning Que paid close attention to his word choice and asked carefully, "Then there should be xiuxingists from this faction. If they are going to die from explosion right after absorbing the ki of nature, then how do they pass down their legacy?"

"Demonism has its own evil ways to reinforce its body and therefore absorb small amounts of ki of nature. But this process is both bloody and cruel. I heard from my mentors that of a hundred people practicing Demonism, only two or three are able to survive through the excruciating pain of exploding their bodies."

"It is cruel." Ning Que wrinkled his eyebrows and said.

He thought silently that only a few people in the world had the potential to xiuxing. The practice of Demonism was only going to waste much of the population of the xiuxingists, which was another reason why the righteous factions did not allow the existence of Demonism.

The elder guessed the thoughts in the youngster's mind. His tone turned cold and his voice became harsh, "Demonism forcefully changes the body of xiuxingists, so how are they human after reinforcing their body?"

"Humans live between the heaven and earth but the heaven and earth are a world outside of human!"

"Absorbing the ki of nature into their flesh, Demonists want to make their bodies into a world."

"But the only world there can be is Heaven!"

"Therefore the thoughts and practices of Demonism are of great evil and are forbidden!"

.....

One night. as they got close to Chang An, Ning Que came to the old man's wagon again, but this time he was not invited. The stars shining on the camp, caused him to look especially sneaky.

The light in the wagon was still lit up, the old man, Lu Qing Chen was reading the notes Ning Que took at that day, looking at the beautiful calligraphy. He couldn't understand how Ning Que managed to write

such pretty words on a shaky wagon.

Suddenly he frowned slightly, slowly put down the paper in his hand, and looked at the curtain. "Come in," he said.

Ning Que walked into the wagon, kneeling on the position where he used to kneel during the day and remained silent for a while. Then he spoke up, "Sir, I still don't understand one thing. I don't have the potential to xiuxing, why do you still spend so much time on teaching me?"

The youngster looked up, his eyes seemed extraordinarily bright and asked with a shaken voice, "Is it because you discovered my talent that you pay a lot of attention to me?"

The old man Lu Qing Chen looked at him surprisingly, opened up his mouth slightly, and after a while he asked, "Where is....your talent?"

Now it was Ning Que's turn to be surprised. He looked dumbfounded. He asked embarrassedly, "If I knew where my talent was.... why would I have to ask sir."

The old man shakingly pointed his think finger on his nose. He really didn't know what to say now.

"Mr. Lu, actually I have many secrets." It seemed that Ning Que still didn't give up convincing a seethrough elite, trusting that he is a talented male protagonist. He rubbed his face nervously, said, "After I ...came to Wei City, in everyone else's eyes, I was extremely lazy, and sleepy all the time, but the reality is that, my sleepiness is due to meditation."

"You don't have to give me that look, this is real...You also know that there isn't much entertainment in the frontier life. Everyday, I just love to write some words, because I am good at it, and I feel happy as I practice calligraphy. I am also reading Extreme Sense. You should understand how boring Extreme Sense is, so I often fall asleep as I read, but as I recall it now, it is not really sleeping."

Ning Que looked at old man and said seriously, "Because when I fall asleep, I could often feel the constructions surrounding me and some others things leave me and fly away. The entire world becomes a place with only me and the world itself. I can even faintly sense some mysterious breath functioning in a particular pattern..."

Lu Qing Chen's feelings gradually got serious. While extremely rare. there are some records about meditation during sleep in the Great Sky Way.

Chapter 24

Ning Que carefully recalls how he felt in a dream... "In my dream, my steady breathing materialized. Warm droplets accumulated and eventually surrounded my entire body. No matter how hard I tried, I could not get ahold of these droplets that are even lighter than water. All I can do is watch them escape through the gaps of my fingers."

"The continual breath seems to become substantialized. The warm drops gather together one by one, eventually surrounding my entire body. But no matter how hard I try I can't hold these droplets that are lighter even than water. All I can do is watch them all escape away through the gaps of my fingers."

Lu Qing Chen forced himself to stay calm. "In your dream, how big was the surroundings? No, actually, what was it like? A cup of water? A brook? A pond?"

Ning Que looked up and answered logically, "I think....it was a sea."

Lu Qing Chen's body suddenly became slightly stiff and he leaned back on the seat with a bit of disappointment. He remained silent for a long while and then laughed at himself. He seemed to be somewhat tired "Yeah, how is it possible?"

From looking at his facial expression, Ning Que could guess that things were not going as he had imagined, but he still did not give up "Sir, is this the primary stage that you talked about? Is what I sensed the Qi of

nature?"

Old man Lu Qing Chen tapped Ning Que's shoulder to show consolation "Primary stage is basically First Vision. A few days ago, I had told you that the Primary stage is when xiu xingists extend their spirits outside of their sea and mountain of Qi and begin to realize the existence of the Qi of nature. In other words, this is the moment when secular people first open their eyes to see a completely new world."

"The world one sees in the first moment determines the xiu xingist's future, because what he sees is the reflection of the Qi of nature in his heart, and the purer this xiu xingist's spirit is, the farther range of Qi he can sense."

Old man quietly looked at Ning Que "The xiu xingists who have low potential can only sense the Qi surrounding his body. In this case, the Qi would simply reflect a cup of water on his heart. If his potential is a bit higher, then he would be able to sense father. The reflection could possibly be a pond. If he can sense a brook or even a lake....then in the future he will definitely become a respectable elite."

Ning Que frowned, intending to say something but the old man stopped him.

Old man continued, "In the world, there are very few people on top of Fate Seeker. Among them, the Sword Saint of Nan Pu is the most outstanding. This Sword Saint got into Primary Stage before the age of six. As soon as he got into the Primary Stage, he saw a non-stop flowing stream of Yellow River! He is truly gifted! He has earned his reputation in the south by simply using his Yellow River Will of Sword. At the moment, he is known to have the most potential to get past the five stages!"

With seeing a flowing stream of Yellow River, the Sword Saint is already the strongest xiu xingist in the world. One can only imagine a xiuxingist that sees an endless sea. Ning Que remained silent for a really long time. Even though he had a lot of secrets, he never considered himself a genius, and yet he still feels somewhat...unwilling to accept reality.

"These words may sound cocky, void of common sense, or even...narcissistic."

He carefully chose his words and lowered his head, "Is there a possibility that I may be, not saying that I am, stronger than the Sword Saint of Nan Pu?.....because I've meditated for many years and therefore my sensory range should be larger when I enter the Primary Stage."

"What is broader than a flowing stream? I am unsure, but it would not be the boundless ocean, because they are two different concepts."

The elder Lu Qing Chen looked at Ning Que, whose head was down, and sighed lightly, "Kid, do you understand what the ocean that appeared in the First Vision represents? It represents the qi of nature of this entire world."

"No one is able to see the entire world when they just step into a brand new universe, because it is impossible. Even a saint mentioned in legends will not be able to see an ocean during the First Vision."

The elder tapped the youngster's stiffened shoulder once again, smiled and comforted him, "Although it was just a dream, it was a sweet one."

Ning Que left without saying another word.

He was already indifferent toward the way of xiuxing. If it weren't for the recent conversation with the elder that sparked his hidden interest, he wouldn't have felt this sad. If there was no hope, then there wouldn't be any disappointment. And if he was hopeless in the beginning, then no hope would have appeared in the first place.

The young maid Sang Sang pushed the hot water tub to the front of Ning Que and dried the towel. She then covered his tired face with the steaming hot towel and asked curiously, "Master, what did you ask when you were out tonight?"

Ning Que's voice penetrated the hot towel, "I told Lu Qing Chen that I have a small secret but I won't tell you what it is. But since I've told you that I have a secret then shouldn't you tell me that you've discovered my secret and kneel before the genius that I am?"

Sang Sang repeated Ning Que's sentence in her head once more and felt dizzy. She quickly massaged her head and took off the towel on Ning Que's face. She rinsed the towel in the water and poured the water out of the carriage, and then said. "Master, I think this time you've become the idiot."

He was like an idiot. Ning Que turned his body to the other side and watched the shiny stars in the sky through the window of the carriage. His palms reached for his face and tried to feel the freckles on his face, and he whispered silently, "You think playing with flying swords is cool? I can play Xuan Yuan sword, can you?"

Sang Sang heard him mumbling some senseless words and shook her head.

Ning Que sat up and took out the old and worn-out Extreme Sense. He did not open the book, but just stared at the cover for a long time, as if he was trying to discover a hidden secret in the book.

"Bring the tub over here," he said. His tone was much calmer.

He lit a fire source and brought the Extreme Senses next to it. A moment later, the old book started burning. He slowly opened his fingers and let the book that he kept for so long drop into the bronze tub. It continued to burn.

Sang Sang was aside, watching this scene in surprise.

Looking at the pages of the book slowly turn black and crumble into ashes, Ning Que's right hand clung onto the window of the carriage. He felt an emptiness in his heart, just as if a friend who lived with him for so long had left him behind, or a childhood dream was destroyed like a bubble.

"Aren't I useless?" He asked.

Sang Sang shook her head.

Ning Que smiled and said, "No one's archery is better than mine, no

one's usage of knives is more ruthless than mine. No one my age could kill as many enemies as I did. I am not useless, I am the Lumberjack of Shu Bi Lake. I just couldn't do tricks with flying swords. If there are opportunities in the future, I will kill xiu xingists.....just like how I've killed bandits in the Great Plains."

Sang Sang closed her lips tightly, nodded her head and smiled.

This wasn't Ning Que's form of self-comforting after giving up, but rather this demonstrated Ning Que's firm determination. After all, if the brave guards in the entrance to the North Mountain were almost able to kill a great sword master, then why couldn't he? There was no true invincibility in this world. If those hidden mysterious xiu xingists were still humans, then Ning Que could defeat them.

In both worlds, when many people discover that they lack the ability to accomplish their dreams, they will feel lost, disappointed, disjointed, and inferior. Many of them will resort to immersing themselves in great pain, imagining success, going into isolation or hoping to go back to the past.

Ning Que is not like that. If he can't become an emperor, he will try to become a calligrapher; if he can't become a general, he will try to become a scholar. And so, now that he has discovered that he can't become a xiu xingist, so what?

It is not wrong for a person to walk on a single path. Suffering may be brought to those around this person but eventually, this person may succeed. However, the people who have the determination to immediately choose a new way deserve even more respect.

Life is interesting because picking another road of life requires more determination and bravery than continually walking on the same path.

Chapter 25: The First Dream

After drowning in disappointment for a few days, Ning Que didn't have a joyful mood. But he happily disregarded these matters because regardless of his mood, it was a suitable time for drinking and forgetting about his hopelessness. Right at this time, Sang Sang's illness had resurfaced. Her two little feet were frozen like tree branches in the winter. Even so, they opened a jar of strong liquor and started a drinking festival.

Although the young maid drank most of the large jar of strong liquor, Ning Que was the first one to become drunk. Sang Sang struggled to move him onto a mattress and cover him with a blanket. Afterwards, she went into the cover as well. Out of habit, she squeezed her small feet into his arms.

With the diffused smell of liquor, Ning Que had a sweet dream.

In his dream, he felt the warm ocean appear once again around his body. But this time, he did not reach his arms into the ocean and could not feel anything. The conversation he had with Lu Qing Chen earlier reminded him that he was dreaming. He stood alone in the warm ocean like a stranger or an observer and watched the entire scene calmly.

He smiled and remembered a phrase in the dream, "It's all an illusion, it won't scare me."

Since he was calm, Ning Que was able to observe the details of the ocean in his dream clearly. The vast and boundless ocean wasn't blue, but

rather it was green. The color was dark but also clear, like a graceful jade.

He stood on the surface of the green ocean and rather than reaching into the slow moving water, he just stood there and observed quietly. He guessed where it would flow next and what shape it would transform into.

Suddenly, two white flowers appeared in the green ocean. The petals were snow white and contained no other colors. They did not have stems like other flowers. They were just a simple and boring white.

The sea waves padded on the bottom of the white flowers. As if they had stems, the two white flowers grew rapidly under the nourishment of the green sea water. All the petals fell into the ocean and transformed into new white flowers. The white flowers expanded throughout the entire ocean and toward the sky. As far as Ning Que could see, the surface was covered with white flowers.

Ning Que watched this miraculous sight and could not remain calm. He softly placed his feet onto the flowers and stepped onto the petals to walk towards the sky. His bare feet touched the fresh white flower petals which bounced him upwards. The feeling was soft and splendid.

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In the carriage beside the grassfield, Ning Que laid sideways on the mattress. The blanket was already half uncovered and there was sweat all over his forehead. In his arms were two feet. The skin of the young maid's feet were much smoother than anywhere else on her body. They were white as snow and looked almost like two fragile little flowers.

Ning Que was wrinkling his eyebrows and constantly moving his lips. It was hard to tell what he was thinking of in his dream. He kicked the mattress and touched somewhere. It felt very comfortable. A satisfied expression appeared on his face and he remained still.



Ning Que had already forgotten that he was in a dream. Although he wasn't concentrated, he walked calmly into the sea of white flowers. As a thought popped into his mind, his entire body began to slowly float away from the petals. Then, he flew rapidly to the space above the sea.

He looked down as he flew to an extremely high altitude. The white flowers on the green sea had already disappeared but he could faintly see a red flat surface deep within the sea. The red surface spreaded out to the sides. He plunged into the sea.

He broke the surface of the sea and dove into the deeper area of the sea.

Without knowing how much time had passed, he eventually reached that red layer -- it was a layer composed of viscous, dark red fluid. Though it was red like ketchup, it had a texture of blood almost fully solidified.

The peace was suddenly interrupted and the blood water boiled up. There were many faceless humans repeatedly standing up, and falling

down. They struggled and cried but no matter how hard they tried, they could not break free from the the thin film that imprisoned them permanently in this silent, bloody world.

Fear crept into Ning Que's body. It turned him into a stone sculpture. All he could do was stand senselessly by the bloody red sea and watch the soundless brutal image.

The bloody sea became land and with it, the sky was restored.

Ning Que stood between sky and land. He discovered that he was on the Wild Plains. Underneath his feet were countless corpses. Among these corpses were cavalries from the Tang Empire, warriors from the Yue Lun Kingdom, marksmen from Nan Jin, and many Great Plains barbarian riders. Blood flowed out of these soldiers' bodies and gave the entire Wild Plain an incarnadine color.

Three black clouds of smoke floated onto the frontline of the Wild Plains and looked coldly at this place as if they were alive.

"The sky is turning dark."

"I said the sky was turning dark but nobody trusted me." someone said contemptuously by Ning Que's ears.

Ning Que suddenly turned around. He saw no one say anything, only a lot of people looking up at the sky. Among them, there were dumbfounded packmans, unwilling officials, scared ladies, and crazily laughing monks. No matter their distinct dresses and emotions, these

people were looking up at the sky as if they were fat geese waiting to be fed.

On the Wild Plains, countless people fearfully looked up at the sky. Ning Que subconsciously looked to where their eyes were focused. Though it was still daytime and the sun was still out, for some unknown reason, the temperature in the Wild Plains was extremely low. Even the sun's rays were gloomy. The entire world was dark and bleak as if night was about to come.

The darkness spread out from the edge of the world. It was absolutely pure black, and like the white flowers he saw in the beginning of the dream, it contained no other colors. This was the darkness in the deepest region of human dreams.

The people who were looking at the sky were very scared. Ning Que was also very scared, but no one knew why they were scared.

Ning Que looked around searching for the person who had talked to him previously. He wanted to ask him what had actually happened and why was the sky turning dark but no matter how hard he searched, he could not find that person. He could only faintly see a tall figure passing through the crowd, walking out of the Wild Plains.

He yelled loudly at the back of the tall figure, "Hey! Is it you? What is this!?"

The tall man did not turn around. He continued to walk away from the crowd until he disappeared. But Ning Que's yelling disturbed the people in the Great Plain who were looking at the sky. Some of them

complained. "The sky is about to turn dark, rather than observe it quietly, you disturb our final moments of peace. You are such an annoying youngster."

The people who complained were minorities. Most of the people looking at the sky in the Great Plains moved their eyes and looked at Ning Que surprised. The expressions in their pupils changed drastically. Some of them were astonished, some were amazed. The rest of them started to cry and their tears fell slowly. A drunkard and a butcher stood beside Ning Que and looked at him quietly as if they were waiting for him to say something. Their eyes all fell on Ning Que as if he represented some kind of hope.

The feeling of been observed by the entire world was weird and the feeling of been treated as hope was eerie. Ning Que suddenly felt majestic and powerful, almost as if he was divine. But he was just a regular person. He did not know what the deal was with the world that was going to turn dark. He was afraid and his fear induced a heart-tearing pain.

Chapter 26 Great city, long time no see

Ning Que awoke from a sudden pain. His pupils dilated from the shock and horrification he felt. He unbuttoned his shirt and started feeling around his chest area, but all he could feel was sweat and not his broken heart. Relieved, he patted himself and slowed down his breathing.

He glanced over at Sang Sang, who was still sound asleep. He looked at Sang Sang's small face and suddenly felt that it was a blessing to be alive.

He didn't want to tell Sang Sang about the horrifying nightmare he just had. Just recalling a small portion of the dream made him uncomfortable. He figured that it was best to forget about the dream.

The next day, the worn carriage started traveling again in the squeaky noise of its wheels. Following the guarding riders, the group continued southward. Around ten in the morning, the carriages stopped at a small village near Chang An. A messenger from the capital who represented the entire official court had already been waiting there for the princess for the past few days.

Ning Que jumped out of the carriage and stood at the side of the cheering crowd. He looked into the distance. There was a hint of a dark gray structure of a city. Nevertheless, it was very far away. Even if he squinted his eyes, he couldn't make out the structure clearly. Ning Que guessed to himself that that place must be Chang An.

The intricate and fancy welcoming of the princess started to move

along slowly, but this time, the master and the maid were not asked to follow.

Ning Que and Sang Sang stood on the sidewalk and watched the fancy carriage slowly pass them. The window was closed shut. Ning Que thought about the princess and the small barbarian prince sitting inside the carriage. He remembered the campfire and laughed a little.

The corner of the curtain of the fourth carriage that passed by them was lifted. The elder, Lu Qing Chen combed his white beard and smiled while gesturing to Ning Que. Ning Que bowed deeply in return.

The guards and the barbarian soldiers didn't unmount when they passed by Ning Que. They just gestured to him on horseback while wearing apologetic expressions on their faces. The social status and manner of the empire were strict. Although the guard leader, Peng Guo Tao was expected to have a great future in Chang An, he didn't dare show any emotion in front of the court officials. The barbarian soldiers were relieved after they gestured Ning Que goodbye. Since the Lumberjack of Shu Bi Lake was no longer around, the barbarians' hopes for entertaining themselves in Chang An were high.

The riders from the Gu Shan Province watched the surroundings with caution. Their leader, Hua Shan Yue glanced one last time at Ning Que and sped up to follow the carriages. He gave little acknowledgement to Ning Que as if he didn't exist, and brushed Ning Que off as a powerless character.

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Ning Que did not care much about getting Hua Shan Yue's respect. Afterall, he was the son of a high class noble, and the most outstanding character among the youngsters of Tang military department. However

now that Ning Que had left the Army, he was only a commoner of the lowest class. Even if he was lucky enough get into the Academy, he would still only be at the bottom of the Empire court officials. No matter what perspective this relationship is seen under, he and the general would have no future relations.

However, was he really willing to take this from the general? Ning Que couldn't bring himself to such a dishonorable position so he decided that he would re-encounter the arrogant young general some day in the near future and give him a piece of his mind.

After the princess and her guardians had left, the population of the small town took a dip. However, the town itself became more lively. The vendors who didn't dare to come out before suddenly showed up. The merchants who tried to avoid conflicts by shutting their doors now reopened their doors and began to manage their businesses.

Ning Que sold the shabby wagon for a cheap price at a store. Ning Que patted Sang Sang's shoulder to show consolation because the shabby wagon and old horse had followed them for many years in Wei City. Anyone would feel unwilling to sell a thing that was such a big part of their past.

They did not choose the wide and open official route, but instead walked slowly along the field away from the official route. At the side, the flowers were flourishing, the butterflies were slowly flapping their wings, and the bees were humming. Eventually, the tears at the corners of the little maid's eyes dried up. Her two hands were tightly wrapped around the laces of the bag. She dragged the package that seems to be even bigger than her. She laughed occasionally as she walked and looked around on the field.

Under the sun, Ning Que took over the heavy package, and chatted with the little maid. Even though he usually could not get a response from her, he was still happy to be talking. He looked over the countryside landscape and saw a farmer resting in the field. Ning Que waved his hands and pretended to catch butterflies as they flew away.

He had left Chang An when he was very little. Later on, he had lived in Mian Mountain, the Great Plains, the Wild Plains, and a small frontier city. In his surrounding, there were only vicious jungle, boring grass land, and ubiquitous danger. Now, he have returned to the center of the Empire. He was looking for a calm and comfortable life. He couldn't hide his excitement and happiness.

They walked for about two to three hours. A shadow suddenly spread over their heads from the brook and peach forest to the front. Ning Que thought that it was still not night yet and just previously, the sky had not shown any signs of rain.

He looked up confused. He saw a black wall in front of him. This wall was so high that it seemed to have no end. It covered half of the sky and also covered the sun. Faintly, they could see three black dots continuously flying in a circle in a high position near the wall.

Looking to the left and right, they could not find the end to the wall. They were surprised by how long this city was. It stood silently between the sky and the land. Sang Sang's eyes widened as she looked at the great city and the crowd of people on the official route that was not far away from them. In awe, she asked, "Is this Chang An?"

The three black dots in the sky flew to a lower point and turned out to be two eagles helping a younger eagle practice flying. They had a nest on the wall. This wall had experienced thousand years of erosion and seemed ragged on the surface but its insides were still indestructible.

The younger eagle learned how to fly and returned to its nest. Ning Que looked up to the greatest city in the world and smiling sincerely. He was happy to finally return to the city that he had abandoned for many years.

Chang An, long time no see.

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Chapter 27 Nice to meet you, Chang An

The greatest city, Chang An, deserved its fame. Because the city was so big, eighteen gates were built; multiple gates in each direction. Even so, the nobles and commoners who entered and exited the city daily would congest the gates and the gates did little to mitigate the long lines on the official route.

Ning Que and Sang Sang stayed on the long line and finally arrived at the gate of the city just when evening was approaching. Seeing the stern soldiers who were carefully checking packages, Ning Que involuntarily thought about the traffic scene in the capital of another world. He laughed and complained a bit about the long lines.

Although he complained with a low voice, the surrounding native citizens complained really loudly. Tang people were simple but doughty. None of them would be afraid of the stern soldiers, but none of them dared to ignore the empire's law and rush through the gate.

After a long time it was finally Ning Que and Sang's turn. The soldier took the military certificate that Ning Que had with him and found out that this youngster was actually his comrade who had accomplished many achievements in the frontier. The soldier's stern face became kinder and friendlier, but when he saw the three knives fastened on Ning Que's back, he frowned involuntarily.

"These are handed down from the older generations of the family. My ancestor had told me..." Ning Que explained carefully.

“The knives are your life....” The soldier gave him a bored look and said contemptuously, “I have to hear similar excuses at least eight hundred times. Kid, just save your time and put down the package. Two little children carrying such a large package, how is that even coming to learn? That is literally moving your entire house.”

He turned towards Sang Sang and saw the big black umbrella on her back. Frowning slightly he asked, “What kind of umbrella is this? How is it so big?”

Sang Sang turned back and grabbed the middle part of the big black umbrella. She looked up at the soldier and said “The umbrella is my life.”

The soldier looked at this little black girl and lifted his thumb praising, “Such saying ...is new.”

Ning Que, who was undoing the tie of the package, smiled bitterly. Ning Que knew that to others it may seem like a joke, but to Sang Sang it is reality.

The big package contained mostly quilts, blankets, and other miscellaneous things. The only noticeable things were the hard wooden bow and several packs of arrows. When the soldier saw them, he had a slight facial expression change.

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The doorway to Chang An was long and dark. The distance from one side to the other was very large; therefore the exit looked like a small hole emitting light. The sun could be faintly seen in a far distance. The red sunlight poured upon the city but was quickly devoured by the darkness and noisiness of the night.

Ning Que and Sang Sang followed the crowd and headed towards the doorway. Sang Sang switched the position of the heavy bag on her back so that the string lay on a more comfortable position. She asked curiously, "Master....Is every citizen from Chang An as chatty as that soldier?"

"About right." Ning Que answered, "The wealthiest people all over the world are concentrated in this city. That's why Chang An's people are very proud. But as they are proud, they are also modest and lenient on the surface because they need to show their good demeanor. Plus, they are a group of people with good demeanor."

"But if people can't express their pride, they will be unable to restrain themselves. How do citizens of Chang An solve this problem?They talk! From the carriage driver to the official in courts, all Chang An citizens are skilled in chatting. From rumors in the royal palace down to the jokes in hotel and brothels, there seems to be nothing they are unaware of. Of course, the thing they like the most is to use a nonchalant tone to discuss about worldly news and warfare events, as if they all are the prime minister of the empire."

Sang Sang laughed a little because she was amused by Ning Que's explanation.

Earlier at the doorway to Chang An, the soldier did not confiscate nor

destroy the umbrella. Now the big black umbrella was on the back of Ning Que, while the three knives were collected into their package. The string of the hard wooden bow was also taken off. After doing all this, the talkative soldier finally let them through without further interruption.

The Tang citizens believe in strength and power. If there were no suitable weapons on their hands, they wouldn't feel comfortable. Therefore the empire was lenient on the policy of controlling weapons. The city Chang An allowed people to equip swords but not knives. Bows were allowed but their strings must be taken off. However, military crossbows were banned, but this was the only limitation.

No one cared if you put the string back on the bow and took out your knife after entering the city. The government didn't care, the military didn't care, and the emperor living in the royal palace didn't care either.

Ning Que and Sang Sang were used to living around the border. Every night in Wei city there were no light besides the candles in the tavern. There was no noise except the talking of the guards. They thought they would see a city asleep when they entered Chang An at dusk, but they never thought that the Cang An at night was.....

A city that never slept!!

The lights shined from the streets brightened the roads as if it were daytime. The streets were full of people, some were shopping on the sidewalk and some were looking at the stars in the sky.

The attires of Tang people, especially the Chang An citizens, were very simple and easy. A tight short sleeved shirt expressed their sharpness. A

man was wearing a shirt with bigger sleeves, but his sleeves were also cut short. Two arms were hanging out of the sleeve. The design was made for him to easily pull out the sharp sword on his waists.

The green shirt man walked on the streets equipped with his sword. His long hairs were flowing in the air as if he was an uncommon swordsman. But when he saw a circus in the street, the man will also stop and stare at their tricks like the ladies around him. He clapped and applauded when the circus finished their tricks, but when the clowns started asking for money he returned to his cool look of an uncommon swordsman. He wanted to appear like he despised the dirtiness of money.

The clothes of Chang An women were simple as well and revealing, or in another word exposed. In the warm days of spring, the ladies on the street hang their arms bare out of their dresses. Some seducing women were wearing low top, the whiteness of their breasts were attracting the attentions of young men.

On the street, the barbarians who hanged wineskin on their waist were curiously looking around the city. The officials from Yue Lun Empire were combing their beard and going from taverns to taverns. The merchants from Nan Ji were drinking on the high buildings and observing the stars. Sometimes their bold laughter could be heard on the streets. A trace of flute music swirled into the street from an unknown household.

It seemed like the wealth and prosperity of the entire world had flown and concentrated in Chang An. It was exciting and was reveling. Boldness and tenderness coexisted; violence and beauty highlighted each other.

Ning Que held Sang Sang's small hands and walked through the ocean made out of people. The surprising expressions on their faces revealed

the fact that they were from rural areas.

There were all kinds of makeup on the street. Sang Sang was stunned by the varieties of product and opened her eyes widely.

A young lady was walking in front of Ning Que. How come her hip under the skirt was so round? A girl went past them laughing, why did she smell like flower? Why did the beautiful women standing near the sidewalk winked, maybe they thought the youngster was cute?

Ning Que held Sang Sang's hand and happily looked around them, he forgot that Chang An was such a unique and memorable place. He didn't want to move from his spot.

Since they didn't want to move from their spot, they walked slowly. The streets finally quieted down. The two were about to rest their minds a little, but they were interrupted by a yelling in the crowd. Suddenly, a wave of Chang An citizens flown in and blocked the next corner ahead of Ning Que.

"There is a duel!"

Across from a tightly packed crowd, they could faintly see two men staring hostilely at each other, both men's parts of their right sleeves were cut off by sword, dropping the floor between them.

The world suddenly became silent. Every audience who stayed to watch tightly shut off their mouth. Keeping the equity of the duel already became every Tang civilian's habit. There was a rule even for watching the bustle.

"In a duel, cutting off the sleeve represents challenge, if you accept, then you have to cut off your sleeve too."

Ning Que grabbed Sang Sang's hand, attempting to squeeze out of the crowd. He explained to her, "Such duel is called living match; only a victory is needed. There is also a duel called dead match, in which duelists have to fight till one died. Such duel needs to get a confirmation from the court. The challenger in a dead match needs to give his own left hand a cut, if the opponent accepts, he has to do the same thing."

"Can he not accept?" Sang Sang asked.

"Of course he can." Ning Que wiped out the sweat on his forehead, patted the packaged Sang Sang carried on her back, ascertaining that no thieves were nearby, continued, "Yet sometimes people, especially men could be easily turned into idiots. They would get crazy for things such as women, love, honor, all these miscellaneous things."

The two squeezed out of the crowd, Sang Sang raised her black face and asked confusingly, "Why don't we stay? I remember that in Wei City you love to watch the scene of bustle. That year when killing a pig, you squatted by the side and watched for the entire night."

"I watched people killing ox and goats often, yet killing a pig was the first time in history in Wei City. Of course I had to carefully watch such strange thing. However, duel is such a common thing in Chang An. There will be always opportunity if we want to watch."

Ning Que said calmly, "Furthermore, we are now in Chang An. I just

want to get into the Academy and study. I don't want to cause any trouble. So, from now on, we should behave like two dogs, tuck our tails."

Sang Sang shook her head and thought, I don't want to be a ****, as for you master, just kill some people in Chang An, things like tucking tail was really not suitable to you.

"Find a lodge." As if had read her mind, Nnig Que said with a frustrated emotion, "I am tired."

Sang Sang pointed to a building on a street in front of them, said, "Look, there is a random lodge."

Chapter 28 Outside the general's mansion

Uncoincidentally, the random lodge was named The Random Lodge. But even after they slept there for one night, Ning Que and Sang Sang could not remember the name of the lodge when they walked out the next morning.

They found a kind old lady and asked for directions. Afterwards, the master and the maid walked towards the southern part of the city. They continued to ask multiple people for directions until they found two big locust trees.

The moment he saw the locust trees, Ning Que recalled a vague memory of his childhood. He closed his eyes, thought for a few moments and then lead Sang Sang onto the path.

There was a silent and gloomy street right between the two locust trees. It was big enough for carriages to pass through, but it wasn't anything fancy or magnificent. On the two sides of the streets were sound-proof houses which were inhabited by people. Many tall trees stuck their branches out the walls of the houses and created nice shades.

At the center of the street, there were two houses -- one on each opposing side. The guarding stone lion on the right side was majestic. It was well-kept as it had no dust or leaves on it. The house on the right has its red doors closed and its door ring rested silently.

This wasn't the case for the house on the left. The paint on the door of the left house fell off due to lack of maintenance. Two banners were flowing in the air as the wind blew. There was only one stone lion left as

the other had disappeared for some unknown reason. Even the remaining lion was broken. Its ears and claws were missing. The backside of the base of the stone lion had collected a pile of black mud which looked like solidified blood.

Ning Que looked at the broken stone lion and remembered how he used to play around the statue with Xiao Shun. He remembered getting caught by the adults in the mansion and getting punished. Then he walked past the corner of the street and remembered how he led his friend who was going to be punished by his teacher to run away from home.

Sang Sang switched her eyes between the shut doors and the expression on Ning Que's face. She felt his sadness and loneliness but she didn't know why. She started to feel sad as well, and the wind between the streets began to feel cold.

The house in ruins was the former general Lin Guang Yuan's mansion. When the emperor traveled to the southern region of the empire to visit, a huge traitor case was discovered inside the capital. The prince himself judged the case. Prime ministers and court officials spectated the process. The verdict was that Lin Guang Yuan had betrayed the empire with foreign powers. The entire Lin family was executed.

The case was already finalized and no one in the court thought about reviewing it. Even if some people remembered this event, they cursed Lin Guang Yuan because the innocent maids and servants in his house were executed along with the family. Not only did he die with a bad name, he also dragged so many innocent lives down with him.

The general's mansion was confiscated by the government. A decade

after the incident happened, the government tried to gift the mansion to other officials. No one accepted this award because of its history. For this reason, the mansion was left empty all this time and fell into ruins.

After walking past the doors of the general’s mansion, Ning Que expressed a hint of dejection in his eyes. However, this was no normal for Ning Que. He didn’t even stop or slow down at the doorway of the mansion. He continued walking so Sang Sang, who was carrying the big black umbrella had to jog to catch up. The big umbrella bounced up and down on the girl’s back. The sound of collision was like the ticking noise of a clock.

The two walked through the long valley quietly. They walked between the red door and the ruined door just like two regular tourists who were lost in the small valley of Chang An during spring.

“No one wants that haunted house, yet the house facing it is on high demand. Why? That year when Xuan Wei General and Minister of Commune each lived on one side of the street, Xuan Wei General’s entire family was exterminated while the Minister of Commune climbed in rank. Now he’s a scholar at Wen Yuan Cabinet. How many rank four or five officials do you think would like to benefit from the house that he had lived in?”

In a restaurant in the corner of a street, Ning Que and Sang Sang both sat around a small table and quietly ate gruel while listening to the

chatter among the residents. To the old residents who had lived here for decades or even generations, the most worthy thing to chat about were definitely the general's treason and the minister of commune's new prestige. They talked about these subjects daily and yet, they did not get tired from the topic. This catered exactly to the master's and the maid's intentions.

"As we talk about the scholar Zeng Jing, he was only a Minister of Commune before. But now, he have ranked up quickly. Have you guys heard the reasons behind it?"

"The thing became so serious that year, even the people in the palace intervened. Who here haven't heard of it?"

One middle aged man shook his head and scoffed, "He is the Minister of Commune, yet he married a brutal wife. His legal wife became filled with hatred due to jealousy that she even attempted to harm the child when the concubine was pregnant. This was not strange. However, after that concubine luckily gave birth to the child after hard experiences, she [legal wife] still wanted to harm the poor child. Eventually, if the people in the palace had not decree a command, who knows what trouble she could have caused in the family."

"You don't know who in the palace gave a word, don't you?" The person sneered, then made a bow with hands folded in front, "I tell you, it's the queen who was angry after learning about this. She personally wrote a letter to Zeng Jing telling him to regulate his wife."

"The queen...."

The people sitting by the table looked into each other's eyes, smiled as if they all knew by heart. Everyone in the world knew that Tang had an excellent queen who was favored by the emperor and who was given absolute trust. She even had the power to read over officials' reports to the throne. At that time, the queen was only a common imperial concubine in the palace. But she became the legal wife later on.

Due to her background, the Queens felt that it was reasonable to intervene. She cared deeply about the Minister of Commune's family affairs and got angry at the minister's legal wife's bullying of the concubine and attempt at murdering her own son.

"Scholar Zeng Jing's legal wife was from a big noble family in Qing He Province. Because of her background, Zeng Jing had to forbid most of what she did. However, no one had expected that the coward scholar could be so bold and harsh when he actually took action! Immediately after the queen gave her words, scholar Zeng Jing gathered his family overnight, killed three butlers who had interfered with the concubine from giving birth, then he used two smacks and one little sedan to send his wife back to Qing He Province. He actually repudiated his wife in a such quick and clear way!"

"That year, the minister made such quick decision mostly because he had to save himself from the queen's pressure. However, unexpectedly, since he did it so quickly and cleverly, he actually obtained the queen's favor. The queen thought that this person could be of use and in addition to other reasons, the minister was given an easy path in court. And now he is in the Wen Yuan Cabinet! No one had imagined that the brutal wife's attempt to kill the concubine and the son would actually lead to a man's lifelong accomplishment."

Chapter 29: The reunion after seven years

The crowd who sat around the table lamented about the past. Ning Que and Sang Sang sat in a corner and silently listened to the crowd's discussion while eating their gruel and vegetables. Ning Que did not have a strong impression of Zeng Jing but he remembered Zeng Jing's fierce wife pretty well. He didn't know who was right and wrong in the family drama that affected the royal palace but these events didn't bother him much. What he actually cared about was the situation regarding the mansion on the opposite side of the scholar's house.....

"Compared to Sir Zeng Jing, General Lin Guang Yuan was pretty unlucky.....well, not exactly. That man dared to betray the empire. Even if he had given his life a thousand times, he would still not be forgiven for his crimes. But the servants in the mansion did not deserve the punishment."

An old man picked up his chopsticks and poked through a salty egg with the sharp tip. He swallowed the egg with a sip of bean milk and sighed, "You guys didn't see it with your own eyes. I was there when the massacre happened. Screaming and yelling filled the General's entire mansion. Human heads were falling like watermelons on the ground. The blood covered the entire ground and it overflowed out of the bottom of the doors. It was horrifying."

"I don't want to speak well of that traitor but sometimes when you think back about things like this, it is really sad. There were several officials who were close with the General but no one stood up to speak for him after the massacre. No one even tried to clean up the corpses after the incident."

The elder put down his cup, looked around the tavern and then glanced at the street outside of the door. He lowered his voice, "Have you heard of the city entrance guard Huang Xing? He was an subordinate bought by the General back from the borderline. He was the one to confess that the General was betraying the empire. Where is this man now? Last time I heard, he was working for the prince. He has a great fortune before him!"

"And that captain who worked under the general, I heard he is doing pretty well right now too. Who knows if these people think about the heads in the General's mansion when they are too busy enjoying their newfound wealth and power."

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No matter how slowly they ate, the meal was bound to be finished. The carefree Chang An citizens drank their last drops of bean milk and ended their daily chat. They gestured goodbye to each other.

Ning Que and Sang Sang were still sitting at the small table in the corner. The gruel on the table was already cold and the veggie was already dried out by the wind but they still didn't want to leave.

"Master, what is your relationship with the General?" Sang Sang looked at him and asked seriously.

Ning Que smiled and answered, "Of course I am related to the general."

"I asked.....what relationship, not related or not." Sang Sang corrected

him.

Ning Que fell in silence. His smile faded and he answered with a sincere tone, "This relationship....can not be spoken of. You are my maid and if I speak about it, the government will execute us both."

Sang Sang looked at him in the eye and knew he was joking. She shook her head, "Master, you are just speaking nonsense."

"In the Tang Empire, the amount of people who were killed for nonsense is no less than the number of people who were killed by barbarians." Ning Que laughed and answered, "Sometimes we know what's going on, but we can't speak of it because just merely talking about it will lead to death. Until then. we will just speak nonsense."

After finishing his sentence, he picked up his chopsticks again. He rolled up the sleeve of his right arm, and his eyes landed on the five small dishes and two bowls of cold gruel on the table. He was unsure of what to do next to kill some time.

At this moment a young man walked into the restaurant. The man was very skinny and had an ordinary face. His most obvious trait was his dark skin. His black face looked like the back of an old oven. It was even darker than that of Sang Sang.

Sang Sang rarely ever saw people who were darker than her. Involuntarily, she looked up curiously at him. She then felt doing so was impolite but she was surprised to find out that this black and skinny young man was walking towards the corner. Her body got rigid for a moment and she clutched the middle part of her umbrella handle using

her right hand.

The dark and skinny man was not going for them. He walked directly to the table next to them and sat down. He ordered several dishes. Sang Sang felt more relax but she didn't take note that this dark and skinny man was sitting back to back with Ning Que.

When the dark and skinny man walked into the restaurant, Ning Que didn't recognize him. They had met in the forest in Yan Kingdom when they were both really young. The dark man had called him little Ning, and Ning Que had called him little Black. Now many years have passed and Ning Que has become a youngster and little Black has grown to become a calm and determined adolescent.

Ning Que picked up some pickles with chopsticks and put them into his mouth. He chewed them slowly and it made the sound "pu chi pu chi," which sounded like a girl who couldn't help but laugh as she covered her mouth. After chewing for a long time, he realized that the pickles were sour veggies that he disliked the most. Coincidentally, they were Sang Sang's favorite.

"Seems like you lived a good life all these years." Ning Que said while stifling his laughter.

Sang Sang put her chopsticks on the small dish of sour veggies. She appeared to be slightly mad at how her master changed his personality today and robbed her favorite food. Suddenly, she realized that Ning Que was addressing the dark skinned man who had just walked in. She froze her movement as the chopstick was about to touch the dish.

The dark and skinny man's shoulder slightly twitched, as if he was trying to hold his laughter too. He said, "Not as good as you. Even a jerk like you actually passed the primary test of the Academy and deceived this little girl to become your little maid. In fact, she does not seem recognize me anymore."

"How old was she seven years ago? She was not a genius like me who knew things innately." Ning Que picked up a bowl of gruel and replied, "Tell me the important things. Among those who murdered my entire family, how many did you find out? Also, among those who slaughtered your entire village and who tried to hide Xia Hou's evidence of crime, how many did you discover?"

The dark and skinny young man answered, "That year the first person accused Lin Guang Yuan of treason, everyone in the world knew. However, it's hard to find out about the people who made statements to conclude the case. I only found out that two of the people got out of jail eight years ago. They are still in Chang An. Ironically, these two people did not really live good lives. I am not sure if they regret the decisions they made that year."

Ning Que did not look back. He pondered silently. Yet the dark and skinny young man suddenly looked back, frowned and said, "Why do we sit back to back? Why do you mail through a twisted path? Where did you learn all these miscellaneous stuffs? How come I feel like we are two spies from enemy countries?"

Ning Que covered his forehead and sighed. Looking at his dark and skinny man's face, he said, "Weren't you carrying out the military department's command to lurk as a spy in a gang? How am I supposed to know that you are an amateur spy?"

The dark and skinny young man laughed, opened up his arms and said, "Who cares about spying, we haven't seen each other for many years. I have to see how you and Sang Sang look like now."

Ning Que unwillingly opened his arms, gave him a hug in the dark corner of this shabby restaurant.

The dark skinny young man was called Zhuo Er. He was Ning Que's first friend in this world.

The time they met was very coincidental and the reason they met was very coincidental. It was so coincidental that the two men became friends who would never betray or separate from each other over the time period of telling two stories.

This was because they had the same goal in their paths of life: to kill Xia Hou.

Or maybe also that prince.

Chapter 30: The Phoenix has a grudge against me

On the sixth year of SkyFore, the Tang Empire and the Yan Empire had a war. General Xia Hou's right wing troop did not arrive to the battlefield on time. He was harshly rebuked by the government. Xia Hou explained that he was ambushed by a unit of Yan Empire's army at Yellow Wind Hill. His right wing troop defeated the ambushers and chased on. Because of this, they arrived late.

The people in Chang An did not know that the Yan ambushers killed by Xia Hou's right wing troop were actually Tang's frontier residents. Several villages were slaughtered. Xia Hou used the adult men's heads as evidence to deceive the public and he later put all the responsibility on the Yan Empire.

Independent of the place, the slaughter of an entire village was a big issue. The court did not believe Xia Hou's explanation. The court sent experienced officials to investigate but the villages were already destroyed. There was no testimony and there were also problems with the investigating officials so the court had no choice but to concluded that Xia Hou's report was true.

Because of the slaughter, Yan paid a huge part of the fertile land in He Xi. The empire also sent their prince to Tang as a hostage who eventually calmed Tang's anger. Yet, not many knew of the grievances of the villagers whose heads were chopped off and whose bodies were burned. And no one knew that there was a dark and skinny youngster who escaped from the village.

That dark and skinny youngster was Zhuo Er.

He met Ning Que at the edge of Mian Mountain. A Xiu Xingist took Zhuo Er away until
now.

"Hey, what stage are you in? Doubtless or Seethrough?"

"Yo, how can you, a Xiu Xing idiot, actually know about stages?"

"Of course I know of the stupid stages of Xiu Xing."

Actually, Ning Que just wanted to brag to his friend about the things he had learned.

"Seethrough your mom! My poor and respectable teacher just stepped into doubtless, and poor me.... I am still in the primary stage. Why else would even I become a spy!"

Ning Que scoffed, "I don't understand why that old man picked you. I begged him so hard that I would die for him and yet he still didn't allow me to follow."

Surprisingly, Zhuo Er didn't argue back. He remained silent for a really long time and then finally said, "Little Ning, actually I have always thought that despite following the teacher, I have not learned anything. You are so smart, so it may be better if you had followed my teacher. At least you wouldn't be like me now. I spent so many years in the army and yet I still didn't get a position close to Xia Hou. No matter how hard I try, I can't acquire any secret information from the top."

Ning Que looked quietly at him, suddenly laughed and said, "Who said that you haven't found anything? At least now we know how many times Xia Hou went to restroom, right?"

"Those things are not useful."

"They are helpful." Ning Que looked at straight into Zhuo Er's eyes and said, "On my way to Chang An, I killed one assassin group from Xia Hou entirely depending on the information you provided me over these years."

Zhuo Er understood how strong Xia Hou's assassin groups were. He was dumbfounded. He could not understand that in seven years, this kid was able to do such a thing. But he did not speak out his confusion. Instead, he simply laughed and asked, "How do you feel killing Xia Hou's people for the first time?"

"It feels decent." Ning Que recalled. He was referring to the feeling he got when he slashed out at one of the members of the assassin group three times. But his mood quickly changed, he frowned. Very seriously, Ning Que stared at Zhuo Er and said "If they find out the relationship between us, you'll get in trouble."

"Chang An is really big and it's not like enemies are everywhere. Moreover, you should understand one thing: To the big figures, the people who had lived in the general's mansion are all died. Everyone in my village was also slaughtered. So you and I are actually nonexistent people. No one suspects anything about us."

"So... how did you, a confidential soldier of Xia Hou, suddenly become what you call agolden fish gang's golden hatchet man?"

"I followed my boss back to the capital. Unexpectedly, the military called me over to become a spy. Also, our gang is not called "golden fish gang," it's called "fish dragon gang." My boss wants me to keep an eye on my gang leader because he is suspected to be related to the Yue Lun kingdom. You know, many nobles' businesses and even the transportation of Tang's military supplies sometimes need the help from gangs to maintain order. If they were to collude with an opponent nation, there will be lots of problems."

"My gang leader?" Ning Que frowned and looked at him. He then said, "these three words show that you really respect this leader. You even consider yourself as the hatchet man of the gang. Little black, you have to keep your mind clear. Even though I never spied before, I have seen many spies in action. I know that spies should not have have true feelings. Once they do, it all ends tragically."

"My gang leader is a good person." Zhuo Er looked down. He remained silent for a long while and then looked up at Ning Que and said with a serious tone, "Actually....he has probably found out about my identity already, but even so, he has never done anything to me."

Ning Que had more to say something, but Zhuo Er raised his right hand to indicate his stubborn denial of the situation. Zhuo Er declared, "He is my big brother, my respectable big brother. You can't persuade me to think otherwise. However, I do have a request for you: if in the future something happens to me, I hope you can help me pay back my debt to my leader."

Ning Que remained silent and studied Zhuo Er. He did not know what actually happens in the biggest gang of Chang An, but he saw that Zhuo Er was serious. Naturally, he felt curious about the gang leader. What kind of person was this leader? How could he earn so much respect from Zhuo Er that Zhuo Er was worried about not being able to pay back the kindness after his death?

In the end of their first conversation in seven years, Ning Que and Zhuo Er talked about the recent happenings.

Zhuo Er heard about the assassin event on the way to the North Mountain. Surprised, he asked, "It was such a good opportunity. Why didn't you make a good relationship with the princess? Although she is a royalty and we are commoners, if you begged her to the best of your ability like what you did to my teacher, who in the world could possibly refuse you?"

Ning Que shook his head and said firmly, "No, although that princess looks smart, she is actually naive and stupid. If I follow her, I may lose my life any moment."

The two separated from the little restaurant. Ning Que and Sang Sang left first. They asked for directions again. As they approached the location of the inn, it started to rain.

The big black umbrella flapped open like a black lotus blocking all the raindrops. Sang Sang's two hands tightly grabbed the handle. She turned her small face and asked, "Why do you always say the princess is an idiot? She is actually a good person."

"Actually a good person?" Ning Que looked at the road at the front and slowly shook his head.

The Phoenix Street to the North Palace was originally gray but after being soaked by the rain, it became black. Ning Que and Sang Sang stood on the sidewalk and looked to the front. They thought that the street was like a black, long and straight ribbon adorning the chest of the great Chang An which was beautiful and solemn but ominous. Especially the phoenix sculpture in the middle of road. The phoenix stared at them fiercely as if it was going fly out of the stone exterior and ambush them.

The master and maid who were under the black umbrella sensed the murderous will from the ancient sculpture. Fear arose from the deepest part of their bodies and their hands which were held together suddenly turned icy cold. They froze and couldn't move an inch.

They just stood beside the sculpture while holding the big black umbrella. A long time had passed before the rain stopped and the sun once again shined its light upon the long street. Only until people started to walk on the street did Ning Que and Sang Sang come out of their daydream.

Chapter 31: The master, the maid and a penny(I)

After waking up in the morning on their second day at the tavern, the master and the maid tidied themselves and prepared to dress up. Because they were going to different departments to obtain licenses to take the entrance exam to The Academy, they wanted to have more energetic appearances. Ning Que sat in front of the window and watched the sun rise. In his hands was a book. His eyes were half closed as he waited for Sang Sang to finish brushing and tying up his hair. He hadn't anticipate the pulling pain from his scalp. He turned his head around and looked at the young maid slightly frustrated, "Is it that hard to tie up my hair?"

"You can try it yourself if you want. You always tie up your hair casually, but today you want your hair to be tied up like the other students and I have never learned how to do that." Sang Sang pulled her hands which were holding the comb back and answered irritably.

"Just look at your attitude and you call me master!" Ning Que answered annoyed, "Do you know who's the master and who's the maid? Just a few words of complaint and you tell me to do it myself! You have to understand, I am about to enter The Academy. I am a true intellectual. If you don't know how to tie it, then just go learn how. I will need my hair to be combed that way everyday!"

` After seeing the sculpture of the Phoenix Street yesterday in the rain, the emotions of the master and maid were troubled. They didn't understand their feelings then and they couldn't be sure if their feelings were actually real. On top of the confusion, there were other reasons that contributed to the sour atmosphere between the two. So, they didn't talk about the event that happened yesterday.

Ning Que looked at Sang Sang's dark face and laughed, "Okay, okay. After finishing up my business, I will take you to Chen Jin Store."

After hearing this sentence, Sang Sang raised her little head and smiled. She turned around to take up a knife from a package. Ning Que took the knife and walked toward a small yard in the back of the tavern and started practicing. His actions were precise, powerful and skilled, but the way his puffy hair moved along to his actions made it looked quite silly.

The Tang Empire was the center of the world and Chang An was respected by every nations out there. In some sense, The Academy was the core of the Tang Empire and it earned praise from all the Tang citizens. Sometimes the influence of the Academy exceeded the power of the royals.

Ever since he knew about the Academy when he was young, Ning Que never understood why the Tang Empire or for that matter, the royals, allowed such a faction to exist. There can be only one sky above the people's head and there can be only one sun in the sky, so how can one empire have two voices?

It didn't matter if he understood the reason, at least after today he would finally realize the status and reputation of the Academy in the Tang empire. He also felt the respect and fear that the official court felt towards the Academy. Just a simple entrance exam of the Academy requires three stamps out of the six departments of the government and only officials who were fifth tier or higher in rank were qualified to give stamps.

After visiting the department of military, the department of officials, and

the department of Mannerism, Ning Que saw more officials who were ranked higher than fifth tier in one day than he had in his entire life. Luckily his identity was yet to convert from soldier to regular citizen or else he would need to visit the department of Ministry as well. Although the weather of spring was nice and warm, running back and forth in Chang An really tired him out. Ning Que thought to himself, if the government was trying to attack Nin Jin, would it be this troublesome?

The ranking system of the official court of the empire was strict and Ning Que was just a little soldier from a borderline village with no background. He thought he would be scoffed at many times. He didn't expect the officials to just let him go after seeing his name and not trouble him.

After thinking thoroughly, Ning Que realized that the princess helped him get special treatment. Because the princess returned from the Great Plain and survived an assassination attempt, surely there will be festivals in the palace and investigations in the dark. But the princess still remembered her promise. Other people would be grateful, but Ning Que isn't like others because to him a promise was a promise. He didn't owe the princess anything even if the promise was made around the campfire when the princess was still undercover.

After obtaining the last stamp from the department of Mannerism, the sun was tilting southward and falling in the sky. Luckily the departments of the Tang empire were pretty efficient and the place that distributed the tickets to the entrance exam of the Academy wasn't too far from the department of Mannerism and the place was still open. There were three young men who had just obtained the permission to take the entrance exam. They gathered around the door and discussed quietly.

"We can't always live in an inn because then we won't have much time

to get familiar with our classmates.”

“It’s probably a good idea to move to the Academy earlier. Maybe we can even get to know some upperclassmen.”

“Living in the Academy is not cheap. It’s even more expensive than living at the Yue Lai Inn which is the best inn in Chang An. I am so envious of the students who attended during the 1st empire period. At that time, food and dorm were all free in Academy.”

“Why do we even save this little money? I think we should get to the Academy one day earlier so we can be familiar with the environment and increase the chances of passing the entrance exam. I heard that the military department gets crazy this time. It recommends more than seventy students...”

Ning Que was ready to walk in but suddenly he stopped and looked towards that young scholar. He greeted the scholar with a bow and asked, “Do you mean.....now the Academy no longer provides free dorm and food?”

The three people looked at Ning Que as if he was an idiot, maybe they were going to

say, “if you don’t even know this, why are you here?”

Ning Que’s favorite thing to do is to make fun of others and call them idiots in front of Sang Sang or behind people’s back. Now, he was being treated as an idiot in front of Sang Sang. Obviously he could not tolerate this, so he turned back and entered the door.

By the time Ning Que walked out again, the young scholars outside the door had already left. Otherwise they would see the youngster's pale face and would definitely sneer at him for a while.

Sang Sang was waiting outside the door the whole time. She used the big black umbrella to block off the sun so that her face wouldn't get darker. She was happy that she came up with such a good idea. Suddenly, she saw Ning Que's face and became nervous. She jogged over and asked, "What happened? The Academy does not allow students taking maid with them? Did you tell the people inside that I can help do some labor for the Academy as long as they give me a place to live?"

"That is not the problem." Ning Que spoke in a hoarse voice and dried up lips. "I just asked. The Academy does not provide food and shelter at all, which means if I get in, I have to pay thirty silver coins every month."

"Thirty?" Sang Sang subconsciously raised her voice, screamed, "**** the school!"

After saying this sentence, she realized that it was meaningless. She frowned and looked at Ning Que and said, "Master, we have a total of 76.34 silver coins saved. On our way to Chang An, we followed the princess so we spent no money. Summing up the money we got from selling the wagon, general's aid, and the gambling debts we don't even have two hundreds silver coins. After arriving at Chang An, we lived in an inn for two days, ate five meals..."

Ning Que prevented Sang Sang's rambling and said uneasily, "The entrance exam will be in a month, which means we have to live in inn for

a month. You have to count this expense too.”

If Sang Sang could see her face now, she might feel a bit happier because her small dark face looked more white due to the surprise and uneasiness of the situation.

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Chapter 32 The master, the maid and a penny(II)

Just about the same time as yesterday, spring rain poured on Chang An. The rain drops landed on the thick surface of the big black umbrella. As if they were turning into dust, not a single rain drop penetrated the surface of the umbrella. The umbrella was so big that it seemed as if it could protect an entire army from a storm. However, even under the umbrella, Ning Que and Sang Sang felt drenched. Their bodies were frozen like ice sculptures.

"Let's find a place away from the rain," Ning Que said. His voice shook with his memory of the weird event that happened yesterday. He then added, "Aside from Phoenix Street."

The master and the maid walked along the trees lined along the sidewalk for a distance and then stopped at a distant street around Northern Chang An. They put away the black umbrella and kept silent for quite a while. They both stared at the falling of the raindrops from the sky and the landing of them on the earth.

"How can the mighty Empire of Tang....." Ning Que began to say but there was no pride in his tone, rather it contained a trace of resentment. He continued, "use education to make money. It is embarrassing. Can't the fee be a little cheaper if I don't eat and dorm there? Just letting you know, I saved your princess and all I get is an easier time obtaining permission for the entrance exam? Why can't you reward me with a thousand silver coins? So stingy!"

Sang Sang wasn't concentrating on the empire's policy and the decision of the princess. Instead, she cared about more detailed things. She

wrinkled her thin eyebrows and lowered her head to look at the raindrops falling onto the stone floor. She raised her fingers and calculated, "We can't possibly live in the tavern for the entire month. We don't have enough money. Master, if you really want to get into the Academy, then living in a ruined temple would be meaningless as well. We have altogether two hundred silver coins and we need to spend it everyday. Therefore our current problem cannot be solved by just saving money, rather we have to earn money."

"How do we earn money?" The youngster used the umbrella as a crutch and pretended to be deeply troubled. "That is a question..." he pondered.

The spring rain continued to drizzle. The master and the maid were sheltered away from the rain as they worried about the money problem.

Obviously hunting wasn't an option. Even if they could earn thirty silver coins a month from hunting, there were no hunting grounds around Chang An. Ning Que realized back in Wei City that the forests and mountains around Chang An belonged to the emperor and so the animals living in the wild also belonged to the emperor. If he killed the animals in the forest, he could be arrested for stealing from the Royal Territory.

Sang Sang raised her small head and spoke timidly, "Needlework is not an option either. That night I observed the stores around the street carefully and the needlework in Chang An is far superior to mine. I have never even seen some of the styles they use in their needlework much less understand these styles."

Ning Que stared into the rain and sighed, "Too bad there are no bandits around Chang An or I could earn enough money from cleaning their

nests. Speaking of which, I was young when I arrived Wei City and I was idiotic. I submitted all of the money I collected from killing bandits to the military. I never realized that I should've kept some for personal use. After realizing the actual purpose of killing the bandits and lumberjacking, the bandits around Shu Bi Lake became way too poor."

Sang Sang lectured him softly, "I told you, you were killing too mercilessly. The bandits of Lu Bi Lake always send people to watch Wei City now. Right after they discovered that you were leading a troop of soldiers into the Great Plains, they immediately collected all of their belongings and ran away. How do you expect to make any money like that? For an entire year there was no income."

"I was young and naive back then. I didn't know what to do."

Ning Que replied embarrassed. Suddenly he raised his eyebrows and said, "What about joining a mafia? I can't borrow money from Little Black directly but I can use his connections to join a mafia and try to rank up and collect protection fees from others."

"You said Academy will test for a student's personality. If the Academy finds out that you joined a mafia and collected protection fees, it may remove your name from the roster immediately and then you will no longer need to collect the protection fees." Sang Sang warned.

Ning Que disliked how his little maid appeared to be simple and honest when showing her strong memory, but appeared to be a genius when she didn't need to show her memory. He said irritated, "Then you tell me what to do? If we have to earn money without letting the Academy know, the only way is to join a mafia!"

"The problem is, where is the mafia? I can't just go on the street and ask whoever I see wearing black 'excuse me, I want to know where the strongest mafia in Tang is. Can you please give me directions?'"

Sang Sang ignored Ning Que's anger that stemmed from his embarrassment and said seriously, "Master, I understand that you feel really shameful, but we have to think of a way to make money. Otherwise let's just go back to Wei City right now."

"I said that if I don't achieve something, I won't go back, even on my life." Ning Que replied.

At Mian Mountain, at Wei City, and at the Great Plains, no matter how hard the situation was, he and Sang Sang continued to live on. However, in this prosperous and developed Chang An, living became a serious problem to them. The lack of a penny could stump a hero, and it definitely gave the master and the maid headaches.

Ning Que's eyes suddenly lit up, said, "I got an idea! Let's sell salted eggs! No, actually Song flower eggs!"

Sang Sang frowned and repeated, "salted eggs?"

He smiled and said, "No doubt, the salted eggs I made were the most delicious at Tang."

Sang Sang looked at him and spoke seriously, "The people in Wei City do not like to eat them and I also don't like them. They are too bitter."

Ning Que's smile faded. He looked at the people walking under the rain and said with a pretentiously calm voice, "Actually, I am just joking."

Sang Sang looked up at his lower jaw, hesitated for a long time, called up all of her courage and said, "Master, there is actually a really easy way to make money, but I am not sure if you want to do it."

Ning Que turned his head and suddenly he felt that the maid's little dark face became unprecedentedly beautiful. He said softly, "At this point, as long as we can make money, there is nothing I will not do."

Sang Sang answered, "Master, you have such good handwriting. Let's sell writings."

Ning Que's face suddenly stiffened, he looked at her and said seriously, "Sang Sang, you've become ugly."

"What?" Sang Sang was confused.

Ning Que criticized angrily, "What do you mean sell my writing? It is called calligraphy! Do you understand calligraphy? How can one sell one's scholarly things! I would rather sell my own body!"

Sang Sang shouted angrily, "Master, you are not a scholar, you are just a lumberjack. Don't you often say that you are better at writing than killing? If you are willing to join the mafia, why can't you just make money by selling words?"

Ning Que disputed weakly and diffidently, "I said it's not called words, it is calligraphy."

He looked down at his boots that were already dampened by the rains. He then looked at the words he just wrote using the black umbrella as a pen and the rain water as ink knowing that he had once again lost to his little maid.

The row of words he wrote using the rainwater was: Fear not of poverty, but of fierce maid.

Chapter 33: The First Calligraphy at Forty Seventh Street

"I can sell them, but I have a requirement."

"Master, what requirement?"

"We can sell it on the street but I want to at least sell it in a shop."

"The shop is very expensive."

"That's the point, because my writing needs to be expensive too, otherwise I will feel ashamed."

"Ok, ok, ok, I will listen to you."

After completely losing to Sang Sang's argument, Ning Que decided to fight on after surrendering so he could retain some benefit or reputation. Eventually, he agreed to open a shop and sell his calligraphy. Now the real problem they faced was finding a suitable place to set up a shop.

The day before yesterday, they found an inn when they wanted one. Today they needed to find a shop for rent, but such luck does just suddenly show up. Even heaven wouldn't provide such good opportunities for people. So in order to find places, they had to find a real estate agency.

The manager of real estate, like commanding an army, took out a map and pointed out some empty places and casually spoke some prices.

Ning Que and Sang Sang first looked at shops that surrounded the palace, then moved to places that surrounded the government offices, and eventually ended up choosing Chang An's east side, which was known for chaos and disorder.

Even though Chang An was really big, it was still densely populated. So the rent was really expensive everywhere. It could be said that an inch of ground was equally as expensive as an inch of gold. Even in the cheapest area east side of Chan An, it's still hard to find a proper place. They only had less than 200 silver coins to use as rent. Therefore, they didn't have many options. For two days, they followed the manager around to seek places, but they still had no luck..

On the third day, they finally heard some good news. Having suffered from Ning Que and Sang Sang's demanding conditions, the manager excitedly waved his arms and told Ning Que that someone was transferring a small painting and calligraphy shop to another individual at the forty seven alley on East city. The shop had all the supplies needed for calligraphy. The monthly rent was 15 silver coins, transferring fee was 50 silver coins, and the lease still had one and a half years left. All of criteria suited Ning Que's requirements perfectly, which were Sang Sang's.

Ning Que and Sang Sang looked at each other and saw the surprise and happiness in both their eyes. The price was indeed cheap and the location based on the map was not bad. However, everything needed to be seen to be confirmed. Moreover, opening a shop to sell writings was directly related to their life living in Chang An for the next several years. They were being careful and did not accept it immediately. Instead they asked to take a look at the small painting and calligraphy shop.

When the three arrived at the location, both the shop renter and master were not present. The manager opened the door that was coated heavily

with dirt. The three people walked into the small shop. Some scrolls of writing hung on the white walls. On the east wall, there were writing brushes, ink sticks, paper and inkstones on the wooden frame. The most satisfying part was that this shop had a backyard and within the backyard, there was a well. Ning Que and Sang Sang casually walked and looked around thinking that the cheap rent was somewhat intended.

"I don't like these paintings and calligraphies. The transferring fee needs to be cheaper." Ning Que looked at the scrolls that filled up the entire wall and looked at the fake and pretentious handwritings on the scrolls. Frowning and said, "The writing brushes, ink sticks, paper, and inkstones are all inferior goods, but they can still be used. I can take them like taking garbage but they should be counted as gifts."

Sang Sang looked up at Ning Que with a prideful smile thinking 'master just said some beautiful words'. The manager was about to cry thinking back at the past two days. He already knew how cheap the master and maid couple were but he didn't expect them to be this cheap! I am simply a manager, not your foe, why did you have to keep making me suffer?

After the manager had suffered for a long time, they finally made an agreement. Sang Sang took out a silver box from her bag. She counted carefully many times before she handed out the silver coins. The two sides signed a contract and from this moment on, the small paintings and calligraphy shop on the 47 alley at east city officially belonged to Ning Que.

After they happily sent away the manager, Sang Sang put down her bag and took out a handkerchief to cover her hand and face. She pulled out a big towel out of nowhere and fetched a bucket of water from the backyard to begin doing chores.

Thinking that they might sign the contract today, the two already checked out and came with their luggages. If they could save a day of dorm fee, they would definitely do it. Apparently that manager didn't notice this detail, otherwise he might have set a higher price. However, it's more likely that he would be scared off by this cheap duo and pass out.

The little calligraphy and painting shop was filled with the smell of dirt. The skinny Sang Sang laboriously moved around with a water bucket and cleaned up the place. Occasionally she would lift her arm and wipe her forehead that was not covered by the handkerchief even if there is no sweat.

Ning Que wasn't concerned about these things. He took a chair and sat by the door looking at the faint corner of the city. He looked at the silent 47 alley and the shadows of pagoda trees on the sides of the street. He felt that this place was sort of elegant. The future business would definitely be great, and he spent so little money. Having felt delighted involuntarily, Ning Que said with a smile, "Master's hand got itchy!"

The busy Sang Sang also had a good mood today, replied, "At night."

"Ok."

Roughly after dinner, Sang Sang unfolded a scroll, took out an ink stick and an inkstone. She poured water into a plate and slowly grinded the inkstone by moving it in a circle on the plate. Shortly ink came out.

Everything was left from the previous owner. Even though they were not great quality, they were a complete set. Ning Que already held a pen and

waited silently aside. On the penholder in front of his right hand, there were six writing brushes. The radii of the each brush was hard to tell.

As the poor quality ink liquefied, there was no fragrance but instead there was a bad ink smell. The brushes on the penholder weren't the best for writing but he didn't mind the small details. His face was filled with a hopeful smile. His left hand's thumb and index fingers, which he kept behind his back, kept rubbing each other as if the hand was itchy.

The so called "itch" was not that he wanted to steal silver, not that he wanted to hit Sang Sang's skinny butt, but because he wanted to write calligraphy.

Ning Que loved calligraphy. Even if there were no writing equipments, as long as there was a tree branch or big black umbrella, he would frequently write on the ground. In the sixteen years of his life, writing calligraphy and meditation were undoubtedly the most important things to him.

The thick brush was dipped into the plate and dragged around. The hair of the brush absorbed the ink entirely and Ning Que stood upright. He quietly looked at the paper in front of him and raised his brush. As the brush was lifted, it felt like a sharp blade was drawn from its sheath and as the brush landed on the paper, it felt like a blade was cutting into a bone. As his wrist moved slightly, a line appeared on the paper.

This line was thick and heavy just like the thick eyebrows of a strong man.

As Ning Que started the first stroke, he stopped slightly but continued

smoothly. After all these years, the way of calligraphy was carved deeply into his mind and soul. He didn't need to pay any attention to the paper and was able to skillfully write the words onto the paper. As the brush moved from right to left, a simple yet carefree scent leaped out of the paper.

The first work of calligraphy Ning Que wrote in Chang An only contained two sentences.

"The mountains may stand tall and the rivers may run wild, there can be thousands of beautiful sights in this world. But if there isn't the Old Brush to engrave them, then they will all be forgotten in time."

Chapter 34: The first guest of Old Brush House

Having a good brush, good ink, good paper, good night view, a beautiful maid, a cup of tea, three burning incenses, a bright moon outside of the window, carefree writing, and when finished, a handless sword will fly through the sky and kill a certain general thousands of miles away. This was the ideal life style of Ning Que.

The first night living in the house at Forty Seventh street, Ning Que felt he was infinitely close to his dream. Even though the brush, ink, ink stone, and paper were cheap. Even though the night view was shallow and not broad. Even though he only had water not tea and there was only bread on the table, not incenses. Even though a moon was yet to be found outside of the window. Even though the maid was young and dark and ugly. Even though he has yet to achieve his goal to xiuxing...

Although there were so many even thoughts, when he placed his brush on top of the white paper and started to write wildly, he still felt happy. He even thought Sang Sang's idea of selling calligraphy was genius.

Wei City wasn't exactly poor, but it wasn't rich either. The supply and aid from the military for sure didn't include things like paper, brush, ink, and ink stones, therefore writing a few scrolls of calligraphy costed a fortune. But now, Ning Que could use these materials as much as he wanted, and he could trade his calligraphy work for money, Sang Sang wouldn't complain either. What happier event could happen to a man?

People always say time goes slow under suffering while fast under pleasure. When Ning Que finally raised his head, drank half bowl of water, massaged his sore shoulders, and decided to take a break, the sunlight

already broke the dawn. Faintly he could hear merchants talking in the streets.

After a full night of writing, there were two stacks of scroll piled up on the table. Besides the first two scrolls which were written in wild style to release his emotions, the other scrolls that he wrote were extremely carefully written. Although they seemed to be out of order, there were vertical scrolls, horizontal scrolls, long scrolls, and a great scroll. Except they weren't framed as of yet, therefore they seemed to be simply a pile of papers in different shape and sizes.

After years of practicing calligraphy, Ning Que was confident in his work. But he couldn't write the work that he was most confident and proud of. What could he reply when the guests asked him when was the ninth year of Yong He? Which mountain was Mountain Hui Ji? As a result he could only copy some modern poems, articles, and some famous chants. But even so, he believed that after hanging these scrolls on the wall, there would be countless officials and intellectuals fighting to buy his work.

"Well, the door is going to be crushed by the people coming in, I should fix it before it collapse."

Ning Que thought confidently. His right hand reached out for the old scrolls that the former residents left over and pulled them down. He was ready to tell Sang Sang to go to a frame shop and decorate his masterpieces so he could hang them on the wall, but he noticed the young maid was sleeping in the corner of the room.

"I was thinking about asking you to buy two bowls of the famous Chang An sour and spicy noodle."

He looked at the young girl who was sound asleep and shook his head. He took a short sleeved shirt and covered her before exiting the house. Following the delicious smell of the noodle and the yelling of the noodle maker, he arrived at his destination.

"Hey uncle, how much for a bowl of noodle?"

"This expensive?"

"You see, my shop is right over there, since we are neighbors, let's give me a deal?"

"Yeah, yeah, it's that shop, I haven't given it a name yet."

"I already settled on a name, just waiting to order the signboard. You ask what would be the name?"

"The Old Brush House."

Just to buy two cheaper bowls of noodle, Ning Que settled on the name of the shop. No matter how you looked at it, it wasn't really a proper and formal decision. Although Sang Sang didn't care about the name of the shop, she still talked about it years after this event occurred.

All in all, this calligraphy shop, with a weird name has an owner who's

also the writer and a maid who's also the worker, had finally opened on the Forty Seventh Street.

The only thing Ning Que wasn't satisfied with was that the shop was too far from the frame shop, and framing took a long time. Except he didn't know how to frame a scroll, therefore he could only be patient and waited for two days.

On certain rainy day in Chang An, the Old Brush House opened silently in the Forty Seventh street. Ning Que wore a new set of scholarly green shirt. He held in his left hand a cheap red mud tea cup and stood behind the opened door. He could almost see the new life waving its hand at him, and that new life looked pretty beautiful.

"The spring rain is as thick as oil, a good sign!"

He sipped the tea and stood inside the house and looked at the rain and wind outside, "The smell of tea and ink is making me drunk. Although conquering a vast territory is great, it still couldn't compare to a good drink."

A youngster wearing a scholarly green shirt didn't really show the carefree traits, but rather demonstrated how silly he was. Furthermore, he was holding a teacup to act mature, and he used such a matured tone to speak. It really was cute.

There was a person under the roof of the shop to hide from the rain. Hearing Ning Que's words, he turned around instinctively and looked at him. Stunned for a moment, he couldn't resist to laugh. The person was a middle aged man who wore a simple green shirt and held a sword around

his waist. His clean complexion had a trace of carefreeness. His laughter brightened up even the rain outside of the roof.

Noticed that there was a man outside and knew the person heard his big talk, Ning Que was a bit embarrassed. Ning Que coughed two times and turned away to face a corner of the Royal Palace, trying to act as if nothing happened.

Perhaps the middle aged man was a little bored, he turned around and walked into the shop. He walked around randomly and observed the scrolls. Although his eyes were full of surprise and praise, he didn't seem to be interested in purchasing the scrolls.

Intellectuals should act like an intellectual, Ning Que didn't care to entertain or serve the guest, even though the man was the first guest of the Old Brush House.

The middle aged man walked around the shop and continued toward Ning Que. He smiled and said, "Young manager...."

Ning Que didn't wait for him to finish and corrected, "Please call me manager. Don't think because I'm young and call me young manager just like I won't call you a sword.....master just because you have a sword around your waist."

"Fine, young manager." The middle aged man didn't change his words but instead he laughed and asked, "I really want to know, why did you rent this shop that no one rented for three straight months."

Ning Que answered, "The place is clean, neighbor is nice, shop in front and house in back. I have no reason to not rent it."

The middle aged man smiled a little and said, "I just want to warn you, there is a reason for this place to be empty for three months without anyone renting it. It's not because others are slower than you, but rather the Department of Transportation will be expended and the government always wanted to take the shops of this street back. You know the government always compensate poorly, therefore it's risky to rent the shops here. You may lose them anytime. You say the place is quiet, but didn't you notice that the shops around you are all closed?"

Ning Que wrinkled his eyebrows and asked, "How do you know this?"

The middle aged man answered calmly, "Because the shops on this street, they are all mine."

Chapter 35: It was a Faintly Cool Rain

When the shop opened, the first guest was the owner who had the right to collect rent. From any perspective, this wasn't a good sign. Then almost immediately, he heard bad news but Ning Que's feeling didn't get worse.

He believed that a man who owned an entire street in Chang An was definitely very wealthy or had a strong patron. Since the owner already promised to free him three months of rent when he left, his worried would be unnecessary. Just this point was enough to make the master and maid happy.

The thing that did make him worried was his business. The business that was as light as smoke.

The spring rain in Chang An actually lasted for 5 days. The rainwater continued falling with no end in sight. Because of the cold air and the wet roads, people obviously didn't want to come out. Now, on the entire street only his shop was open. The shops next to his all were closed so people were not gathered together. This make the street look even more desolated. Everyday, there were only two or three people walked by. Other than them, there were only two or three sparrows jumping around. How could there be any business.

What Ning Que called "spring rain as thick as oil" on the first day became "spring rain as thin as urine." He sat on the chair and looked at the rain. He couldn't help but sighing. IF human's eyes could have power, if he was a Psychist in Fate Seeker stage, then his eyes filled with anger and resent were probably enough to erase the grey wall.

That mid aged man said that the entire 47 street was his, but it didn't include the gray wall facing the Old Brush House. Behind the gray wall was the department of transportation storeroom, which was one of the reasons Ning Que felt mad.

At noon, a group would step into the desolate store. A fat old and rich business man and two disciples were the people that would come to the store. Ning Que realized that they meant trouble. Ning Que thought that they were persuaders hired by the empire's department of dismantle so he kept hard to avoid them and be cautious of them. Until after Ning Que and them exchanged a few lines, Ning Que realized that they were simply another group of people seeking a shelter from the rain.

Since they were not guests, Ning Que wasn't motivated to stand up and serve them. He held a slightly warm low quality teapot and looked outside. He narrowed his eyes as if he were to fall asleep any moment comfortably. In truth, his heart was about to burst due to his urgent desire to make money.

That fat wealthy elder kept his hands behind him. He leaned his face near the wall and read carefully. For some unknown reason, the people who entered the Old Brush House all had a habit of keeping their hands behind their back as if they that they had good eyes. This wealthy elder had lived in Chang An for a really long time. He had mingled with men of letters for many years so he could actually spot some good work. He stared at the scrolls for a while before he spoke to his disciple, "Honestly, I didn't expect to see some good writings in this shabby place."

These words were probably counted as a praise, but it sounded arrogant and supercilious. Such tone obviously wouldn't make Ning Que consider him a bosom friend. Ning Que still sat on his chair seemingly indifferent, but actually interested to what they were saying. He carefully

listening to what the rich elder would say, hoping to sell his first scroll.

"Youngster, who wrote these words?" The fat rich elder turned head and asked.

"I wrote them." Ning Que slightly leaned his body forward and replied politely.

The fat rich elder stopped saying anything. He stared at the scroll a bit before shaking his head and sighed regretfully, "Sigh.....unfortunate, so unfortunate. These scrolls could be considered beautiful. However, the writer was too young and tried to pretend have a great calligrapher's maturity and vicissitude. Anyway, since I saw it today you got lucky. San Er, take the scroll down, I want it."

Ning Que turned around and looked at the three people. "This guest, how much will you pay?"

"If this scroll was sold on the street, it would be worth 500 copper coins the most. But since you have to pay for the rent, I think you are still young and have potential. I will pay 2 silver coins." The rich elder smiled and said.

Ning Que picked up the tea and drank it. He then put it down and cursed, "Fuck off."

The rich elder suddenly became mad and yelled, "You little kid, how could you not know how to appreciate favors!?"

"Youngsters can be expected but they can't be teased." Ning Que replied, "Before you claimed that I am too young but tried to pretend to have a great calligrapher's maturity and vicissitude, I was prepared to tell you to fuck off. But before I did, I wanted to see how much you are willing to pay. If you offered a high enough price, I wouldn't care even if you teased me. Unfortunately, the price you offered me was not enough to tease me."

The angry rich elder left with his disciples. Sang Sang who was washing the veggies ran out from the backyard and looked at the the men's shadow disappearing in the rain. She felt unwilling and regretful. She stared at Ning Que, who was sitting in the chair, and said irritatedly, "Master, that was 2 silver coins!"

Selling two inkstones and three stacks of paper were the sole income of the Old Brush House in the past few days. Even though the renter freed their three months worth of rent, Sang Sang thought about the horrifying expenses in the future and could not sleep well every single night. Therefore she would feel mad when Ning Que rejected the offer.

Because no one came in anyway, Ning Que closed the store after eating lunch . Ning Que kept trying to comfort the little maid's young but heavily wounded soul. In reality he wanted to relieve his own worries. He walked with Sang Sang and went to the famous Chen Jin Ji make up store. On the way, they also bought several light readings in a bookstore called Zhan Ming.

The effect of the walk on the two was great. Sang Sang held a stack of books in one hand and a cosmetics box from Chen Jin Ji in the other. On her dark face was a smile that she couldn't hide. Ning Que also felt really good. Ning Que held the big black umbrella with right hand and and collected rain drops on his left hand. Raindrops that landed on the

surface of the umbrella and his left hand made "pa pa" sounds. His boots stepped on to the rainwater and made "pa pa" sounds. The master and maid couple, like two little sparrows, jumped around and returned to the 47 street.

Suddenly, the black umbrella slightly shook. Ning Que stood in the rain looking at a location ten meter away from his shop. The location was the gray wall that had become black due to the rain. Ning Que saw a man with a black face but pale due to blood loss leaning on the wall. His right hand that grabbed the handle suddenly tightened up.

Pa, like hitting a war drum! He suddenly took a step with his left foot into the puddle on the green flagstone and caused a splash. He stored the power of his entire body on the waist and the belly, ready to run to the gray black wall any time.

But at this moment, the bloody dark face guy looked at him and made a smile with lots of effort. Then he shook his head in a determined way. — There was a scary looking wound between his chest and belly. His black clothes all ripped, blood spread out, and fragmented bones sticking out. Even the great xiu xingists who entered the legendary Limitless stage wouldn't be able to save him.

Seeing this, Ning Que understood his determination. Then he heard the dense footsteps and shouts. He slowly and awkwardly took back his left leg. His right hand that grabbed the handle trembled.

"The military department is a chasing spy! Unrelated people please stay aside!"

Several tens of Tang Yu Lin soldiers ran to the street. They surrounded Zhuo Er who was leaning on the wall. Their facial expressions were stern and cautious. The general who was leading the soldiers saw Zhuo Er's wound and loosened his breathe.

The spring rain dropped down faster and harder flushing the gray wall. The gray wall turning blacker and blacker. The rain flowed along the wall, like a small brook, quickly flushed out the blood Zhuo Er dyed on the wall.

(TL Note: RIP friend A of Ning Que. Say your Graces guys)

Chapter 36: When Pain Penetrates, His Expression was Still Calm

Although the military purposed a strict lockdown on Forty Seventh street, the crowd of people who were curious gathered around the now black wall. They didn't care about the cold rain that poured on top of them. They were only interested in one thing and that was the dark faced man leaning on the wall. Some of them were nervous, some were insecure, and some were excited, but their feelings didn't matter because they were all trying to figure out what happened.

Ning Que held the black umbrella and stood in the rain. He wasn't anywhere near Zhuo Er who was sitting in the rain and his facial expression was extremely calm. He looked at his friend closely and carefully trying carve the said complexion into his memory.

When they met seven years ago in Mountain Min, his face was already this dark. Why are you so dark? You are darker than the bottom of a pot, darker than Sang Sang, and darker than the night. But seven years later, the dark boy had grown into a dark man. The face was a bit foreign to Ning Que, but he wanted to look at this face sincerely one last time. Remember it until his death.

The crowd was suspended after the military carried Zhuo Er out of the Forty Seventh street. Ning Que and Sang Sang returned to their shop under the black umbrella. Although he seemed calm, Sang Sang clearly observed that there was no emotion in Ning Que's eyes. Just like a body without a soul.

The shop was closed. Ning Que sat in the chair and was silent for a long time. Then he said deeply, "Let's eat noodles for dinner."

"Sure," Sang Sang answered quickly and entered the backyard.

After eating Sang Sang's specialty, a bowl of noodle with three fried eggs, Ning Que's emotion seemed to have return to normal. He even made fun of Sang Sang after he finished eating, but his laughter was nevertheless dry and bitter.

When it was dark at night and not a soul could be seen, Ning Que walked out of the shop. He made sure no one was following or looking at him in the dark. He slowly walked to the gray wall on the opposite side of the shop. He raised his hand and slowly rubbed to feel the wall, but the body heat of Zhuo Er already left the wet and cold wall. Ning Que didn't know what that guy wanted to do when he came here just before he died or what he wanted to tell him. Ning Que didn't know what Zhuo Er thought about when he waited so long in the freezing rain.....

His thin and long finger stopped when he saw a piece of brick. There was a faint blood stain on the corner of the brick and a tiny mark. Ning Que couldn't see it with his naked eyes but he felt it with his fingers.

After returning to the shop, Ning Que gave Sang Sang a piece of paper soaked in oil and told her to save it carefully. Then he boiled water himself to heat his feet, which was something he rarely does. After all this, he went into the cold bed. Just like usual, Sang Sang was sleeping on the other side of the bed with her body crawled together like a mouse.

"Seven years ago I met Zhou Er and stayed with him for around fifteen

days. After that he got taken away by his damn master, but you probably forgot all about that. All these years he didn't learn much from his master. Because of that he was still just a spy in the military and couldn't achieve much."

"We did contact each other through mail, but we didn't see each other for seven years. That's why I don't know what kind of person he turned out to be. If you say we have a deep relationship..... it would be false. Honestly speaking, the relationship between me and him was built on mutual benefit. Or more precisely, I used him to obtain information of Xia Hou."

"But he just died like that, this is frustrating. Now the only person who knows about the massacre is me. Of course I'm not counting you in. Then wouldn't this responsibility fall on me? But I already have a bunch of trouble on my back, where would I find the time to care about these matters?"

Sang Sang knew Ning Que only needed catharsis and self conviction, but not an answer. That's why she didn't speak a word, but it seemed like she actually fell asleep.

But Ning Que couldn't speak, he opened his eyes and looked at the corner of the roof that had water stain. Suddenly he sat up and covered himself with a cotton shirt. He exited into the yard and took out the three old knives from the wood and started sharpening them.

After he finished this task, Ning Que was still not sleepy. He went into the shop and lit the candle. He poured water into the ink stone and started grinding the ink. He sank the brush into the dark ink and took out an old paper. The brush poured down the ink onto the paper just like the

clouds poured down the rain. Ning Que wrote down a few lines of word.

“ To think about the past bring out the pain and cry that penetrates the heart and mind. but it must be endured. He has yet to succeed but has already drank the poison. He endured it all. No words can be written to express my thought, Ning can only bow.”

There was no expression on Ning Que’s face and his eyes were calm as the surface of an undisturbed lake. This contradicted with the sad and lonely words on the paper. Unknowingly, Sang Sang got off the bed and stood beside him. She looked at the words on the table in silent and raised her little head and looked at him in confusion.

“These words were written in the past, I’m just copying,” Ning Que explained, “The family tomb of the writer of these sentences got destroyed. Although it was repaired immediately afterwards, but he still wasn’t able to return and looked at it. Therefore he write these few sentences in despair and anger.”

Sang Sang nodded her head, but from the confused expression on her face, clearly she still didn’t understand. Ning Que smiled and didn’t explain further. Although he wrote and practiced this famous sentence more than ten times, only today did he understand what kind of pain can penetrate one’s heart and soul. What kind of event was so sad to the extend of indescribable by words.

On the next day the rain stopped.

The sun that was washed by the spring rain appeared to be especially clear and beautiful. The sun shined on the silent forty seven street and colored all the building's corners and the gray wall. The door of the Old Brush House was widely opened. Ning Que sat on the chair. He was reading one of the light readings he bought. Occasionally he would frown or smile due to its content. At the same time he would pick up the tea and take a drink.

The seemingly extremely leisure light reading contained an oily sheet inside. On the paper that couldn't be wet out by rain forever, the words appeared very clear. No he wasn't reading the book but this sheet of paper.

This oily paper was what Zhuo Er had put into the wall before he died. It recorded a few names, some information about their hobbies and daily tracks. Ning Que didn't know if this sheet was related to Zhuo Er's death or not, but he knew at least one point. If he wanted Zhuo Er's death to be a bit more valuable or in another word, Zhuo Er could die more willingly and happily, then he should do something.

The first name on the oily paper was Zhang Yi Qi.

Zhang Yi Qi was a censorer in the empire's department of censor. He was responsible for investigating and examining all the government officials and impeaching the corrupted ones. When this Zhang censorer was only at the bottom level of the department of censor, he was responsible for helping investigating Xuan Wei general Lin Guang Yan's treason issue. Later on, after he advanced to a deputy governor, he was one of the officials who were examining the case slaughter in the village in Yan kingdom.

In thirteen years he advanced from upper ranked eighth to lower vice ranked sixth. From every point of view, this didn't sound like a successful official path at all. However, Ning Que wasn't concern about this. He only concerned about what role did this guy play in the two cases. General Xia Hou could defeat his enemies by using these incidents and get away from being punished in the slaughter case. This person obviously used a censor's ability.

Then, you can die now.

(I am guessing that Ning Que is hinting that General Xia Hou worked with Zhang Yi Qi and escaped his crimes. Well for anyone that might have gotten confused...)

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Chapter 37: Searching, seeking, where is brothel?

Although the censor's rank wasn't exactly high, the power and ability he held wasn't low. If the censor was ranked in the sixth tier, he would already be an important personnel in the empire's government system. Censors are guarded heavily by the empire. No matter if they are in the court or in their houses, there will be many subordinates or guards protecting them. A poor calligraphy-selling youngster wanted to kill a censorer in the capital of the Tang Empire, Chang An. The scene sounded like a fiction tale, one of the Eastern kinds that focuses on a single hero.

But Ning Que never thought of how to kill the man. In his view, murder was the easiest thing in the world. His life started out from a planned massacre and later on in Mountain Min, the borderline, the Great Plains, and the opening of the North Mountain, countless beasts and humans fell before his knife and arrows.

Right now the only thing he worried about was how to kill the censorer Zhang Yi Qi without being discovered. Although Ning Que was confident in his ability to kill Zhang Yi Qi, he understood that he was up against the powerful government of the Tang Empire and the mysterious xiuxingist of Chang An. He knew that if he didn't escape quickly after the murder, it would be the end of him.

There wasn't much information on Zhang Yi Qi on the oily paper and it wasn't suitable for Ning Que's plan. However, there was one piece of information that Ning Que could use. It was that Zhang Yi Qi may seem serious and strict on the surface, but he is actually a pervert. He constantly goes to brothels in private in search for pleasure. Because he has a bold wife and carries the reputation of a censor, he has to be extremely careful whenever he goes to the brothel. Unfortunately, Zhuo Er was just a low ranked spy and he never learned which brothel Zhang Yi Qi goes to.

"There are so many brothels in Chang An, which one would you attend?"

Ning Que thought deeply and forfeited his previous plan which was to stalk Zhang Yi Qi until he goes to the brothel. The censorer must have his own way of hiding if even an official spy from the military wasn't able to use this method to find Zhang Yi Qi's place. In addition, the censor is just a low ranked official and the chatty Tang citizens probably weren't interested in his life style. It would be difficult for Ning Que to obtain any desired information from the streets. The situation was a bit troublesome.

Aftering leaning on his chin and observing the sun after the rain for a long time, Ning Que suddenly stood up.

He found the answer. Ning Que finally realized that this was the same as hunting in Mountain Min and lumberjacking in the Great Plains. If he wanted to know where the old bear or where the bandits were and there were no friendly elder hunters to supply him with a map, then the only thing he could do was to use his own feet and walk into Moutain Min and the Great Plains. He has to use marks on trees, dried feces in the grass and the leftover ashes under the mud to find his way.

Ning Que was a good hunter and an excellent lumberjacker. He could use these details to determine the old bear's hiding spot and if it was hurt, he could use these details to determine how many bandits were in the nest and if they had they left Shu Bi Lak yet. Ning Que was confident that he would be able to pick up the details himself and determine the Tang official's daily habit and find a way to quickly and silently kill him. The thing that he needed to do most was walk into Chang An.

"I'm going to walk around the city." Ning Que yawned and told Sang Sang as he walked out of the door.

Sang Sang followed him to the door and asked, "Where are you going? Should I follow you?"

Ning Que knew what she was worrying about. He smiled and replied, "Some places are forbidden for you to enter."

Walking onto the sunny street in Chang An, Ning Que started to feel better. He intentionally forgot about the blood in the spring rain and then he acted like a young scholar who was studying abroad. He first went to the bookshop to return the light readings that he had finished. Next, he began to wander between the censor station and Zhang's mansion.

The next day, he walked in willows' shades, stood by a candy stall, watched the square face censor as he walked in and out of the censor station. From far away across the crowd, he watched the censor's robust follower, the police on the street and the Yu Lin rides that occasionally passed by. He knew that he couldn't just assassinate the man on the street.

The entire day seemed to be of no use. At evening, Zhang's mansion's door was left wide open. It looked like the censor was about to head to someone's invitational feast. The censor's wife and several concubine looking women all walked out to send him off. People on the street were laughing and jeering at the censor. Some expressed their jealousy towards the censor. However, Ning Que, who was drinking tea in the tea

shop noticed some details: besides the bony lady with a cold face, the other concubines all looked somewhat chubby.

The censor's aesthetic view on woman was never shown for his wife, but rather he only showed it towards the concubines. The reason to marry someone could sometimes be money, future or family matchup... sometimes even false feelings of love. Yet the reason for Zhang to get concubines was very simple; purely to satisfy his sexual desire.

"So he likes chubby girls." Ning Que laughed inside his mind and thought as he looked at the concubines who stood honestly like a quail behind the censor's wife whose eyes frequently revealed crafty and complacent feelings.

Following the censor's sedan for four streets and watching the sedan enter the pompous prince's mansion, Ning Que quietly took two glances at the big door of the prince's mansion and then turned and walked casually to a crowded place. He asked a random guy, "Friend, I want to know, in Chang An, are there any brothels known for pretty chubby girls?"

This question was very dumb but after handing over a silver coin, no matter how dumb the question was, he could still get a good answer. In that guy's eyes, Ning Que suddenly became a wealthy and young foreign student. After the stranger laughed for a while, he responsively and detailedly described the brothels in Chang An.

Remembering all the names was even more work than the Academy's entrance exam. Ning Que rubbed his eyebrows, tried to smile and said, "Too many, which are the most expensive ones? Also, the environment needs to be quiet."

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Holding several famous brothel's names and addresses, Ning Que searched around in the glittering Chang An, wandering and hesitating at the romantic places. He didn't go into some of the buildings using the outer appearance and surrounding environment to judge whether or not the censor would visit such a place. This was purely a hunter's instinct.

However, the problem was that he really wasn't good at hunting in such places. The procurers outside were diligently calling him and yet he did not enter. He felt somewhat embarrassed. After walking to the fourth brothel on the roster, he realized that his method was not only stupid, but extremely stupid.

There were so many brothels in Chang An. Among them, there were quite a few ones with a quiet environment. Which one of them wouldn't have some popular chubby girls? If he searched randomly like a blind bear the chance that he would encounter the old bear was very small.

He wandered a while outside the brothel and then unwillingly turned back and planned to leave. Suddenly, he heard a ringlike sound. The clear and melodious laugh flew really far on the Chang An street and drew many people's attention.

Hearing the sound, Ning Que turned back seeing the illuminated brothel. The girls who were working laughed while leaning on the fence. Inside the building, there were people dancing with red long sleeves. It was as if the girls were laughing at the youngster who didn't dare to go in.

"What a contempt!"

He weighed the heavy coin bag in hand and looked at the pretty prostitutes who were giggling and giving out fluid glances. He made a hard decision, looked up with a straightened back, lifted aside the forward swing of his clothes and vigorously walked into his new era.

Chapter 38: Flower, Wine, and Fruits. As Expected

Going to the brothel was to track down Zhang Yi Qi, going to the brothel was to avenge Zhuo Er, going to the brothel was to earn equality for the country men slaughtered in Yan Kingdom, going to the brothel was to promote justice for those killed in the general's mansion!

Thinking in a such way, Ning Que walked into the brothel. He then noticed that the excuses were all lies. If he insisted in thinking in such a way, Little Black would have definitely came back from ghostdom and give him a hard kick.

Because he was thinking of all these things and because he was about to open up a new era in his life, Ning Que felt nervous. Until he entered, he recalled that he did not see the signboard of the brothel. In fact, this brothel did not even have a signboard.

With the two waiters diligently calling him over, he passed a small yard and walked into a building ablaze with lights.

Ning Que scanned the hall casually and calmly. He was somewhat surprised that the brothel seemed noisy from the outside but was actually very quiet, which was quite different from regular brothels. Obviously, he had never been to a brothel before. There was one time when he glanced at a brothel from afar when he was taking Sang Sang to see a doctor and to buy Extreme Senses. So more accurately, the brothel was very different from what he imagined.

Inside the hall was very bright and there were traditional string and woodwind instruments playing. The music was clear but not lustful. In the middle on the stage covered with red blanket, several slim and pretty girls

were playing qins (a chinese 7-plucked instrument). They were concentrated on playing the musical instruments. Their eyes were soft and gentle, but not flirty or provocative which was unexpected.

After entering the hall, the entire world seemed to calm down. The girls that were leaning on the fence and laughing at him became very distant and inaudible. However, immediately on the second floor, the sound of small footsteps came up. Ning Que guessed that it must be of the girls that were rushing to see him so he hurriedly looked down to hide his embarrassment.

The waiter quietly asked him what service he wanted. The waiter was careful not to show any disrespect because of Ning Que's young age and because he was being laughed at by the girls upstairs. Ning Que weighed the silver coin bag in his pocket and guessed that the several dozens of silver coins that he secretly stole from Sang Sang would probably not do much at this place so he casually pointed at a desk in the corner.

A pot of wine, two dishes of almonds, two dishes melon seeds, four dishes of desserts, one cold and one hot towel, and even the little bucket used to hold the melon seeds shell was an extremely delicate lacquer. On the black paint of the lacquer was a red plum blossom which was very beautiful. All of these summed up to four silver coins. He did not feel that it was overpriced at all because the service and luxurious arrangements gave him, a poor kid who lived in the frontier for many years, an enjoyment that he had never experienced before.

He drank two cups and ate a few fruits. The stringed and woodwind instruments concert already changed into a dance. The body wrapped under the unlined light garment rotated and jumped in circle following the music. As the girls extended their arms and legs, their fair skins became visible and the previous calm mild atmosphere in the hall then

warmed up.

In the hall, beside the guests, there was a pretty and yielding girl sitting down. She was smiling and the atmosphere came like the arrive of night. The distance between man and woman naturally became closer. They leaned on each other and occasionally there were people kissing. For the rest, what soft parts the man's hand in the big sleeves was touching was unknown because the building had strict rules which stated that there weren't supposed to have any exceedingly intimate scenes happening.

Now, Ning Que who sat alone in the corner appeared to be so different from the current atmosphere. He did not have any girl sitting next to him which was truly an embarrassing thing in this place especially when the girls on the second floor laughed and teased him. Even the girls embraced in the guests' arms started to occasionally look teasingly at him. The embarrassment was unbearable.

A young man glanced at Ning Que and saw his problem. He saw the new clothes on the youngster so he did not think that Ning Que did not have money. Instead, he thought that Ning Que was too embarrassed to call girls over. So he laughed out loud and indicated to the girls in his arms to invite Ning Que come, so that he wouldn't be too lonely.

Tang people were generous and fond of liveliness. They had good hearts. Complete strangers sitting together at the same table and chatting and drinking was not out of the norm in brothels. Ning Que was a little confused but after receiving the invitation, he didn't want to be seen as a bad mannered person so he gestured and let the waiter move his poorly looking dishes and wine to the other table.

There was no rule in the entertainment field to address each other's

name and background. They were all people seeking pleasure and even if they met, they did not need to know each other. The young man didn't ask who Ning Que was, instead he just kept on drinking and laughing. After drinking a few cups of alcohol, he started to open up as well. Since Ning Que was a talkative person from the start, he replied to the young man a few times and the table became much more lively.

The young man seemed to be in a good mood. He eyed Ning Que a little and said to the manager generously, "Send these two ladies for this young brother. Their age and origin don't matter but they must be funny, understanding and knowledgeable on how to serve people."

Ning Que thought to himself, doesn't this mean ages and ethnicity aren't barriers? I never thought the people of Chang An would make such an open statement and was laughing to himself when he suddenly realized what the young man actually meant and he was shocked. He waved his arms and gestured that there was no need for such a request.

"No trouble at all..... no need to be modest." The young man laughed a little, but it sound perverted, "Young brother, if I didn't observe wrongly, are you still a virgin?"

Ning Que wrinkled his eyebrows in embarrassment and the unnoticable freckles on his face suddenly started to show. He thought to himself, right now am I supposed to gesture to him and yell, brother, you observed correct!

The manager accepted the request in a hurry and told the young man not to worry. The manager then turned around to make the schedule. The young man saw the odd expression on Ning Que's face and guessed, "Does young brother not like mature women who know how to take care

of people? Do you favor the pretty younger ladies?"

Ning Que sat in his chair dumbfounded like a piece of wood. His eyes were floating everywhere and it was hard to guess what he was actually thinking. Suddenly he made a decision and smiled gently, "To speak from my heart, I still like girls around my age."

"Good, good, good. This is the nature of a man. We should be straightforward and not act fake."

The young man held his fan and praised. He then started laughing, "You are still a teenager, if you want girls your age, then they are definitely new in the business. I never knew young brother liked this type of play."

Ning Que raised his eyebrows slightly and was ready to speak about his condensed imaginations from the past few years but suddenly a young maid ran down from the stairs and walked to their table expressionlessly. She said with her clear voice, "Young mister, Madam Jian invited you."

Just before Ning Que was able to enter a new age from the help of a friendly young man, a young maid was interfering. Ning Que opened his mouth slightly and thought back to the storyline of countless tales. Whenever the male protagonists of the story enter a brothel, there would be all sorts of accidents and interruptions in his business. Some of the accidents include the brothel being burned down, people fighting against each other, jealousy, or the bold wife showed up in the brothel.

After thinking about this, he started to feel nervous and disappointed. He didn't even know who Madam Jian was. But the tables of customers were surprised after hearing the name. They all started to look at Ning

Que with admired or even jealous eyes.

The young man was stunned for a moment and then, he patted Ning Que on the shoulder and laughed, "The fortune is in your favor."

Ning Que woke himself up with his heavy palms and then noticed the expressions on the customers' faces. He was confused but Ning Que started to become interested and curious of who this "Madam Jian" was. Of course, it included many erotic imaginations.

Chapter 39 Madam Jian angrily calling with Red Sleeves

Many years later by the side of the mountain, Ning Que would recalled the first time he met Madam Jian. At that time he still couldn't help but think back to the event with a self-mocking laugh and sigh for a long time. But this is an event to be told later...

Ning Que at the moment went up the stairs full of hope thinking that tonight he was the lucky farmer in the legend. As he walked up, he could see a pretty Flower Girl waiting behind the curtains, but he never expected what he would witness. When that maid pushed the red door and lifted the curtain, his dreams were crushed.

The lady in front of him was already old. The crows' feet on the corners of her eyes were very clear to see. She maintained a perfect shape, plumped chest, thin waist, and round hip. Everything were covered in a cloth gown, but her forehead was very wide and big like the little hill on the grassland. Her eyes looked kind and frank. There were extremely light hair under her straight nose and above her chubby lip. She was not ugly, but was definitely not a pretty one that was chosen from hundreds and of course she was not related to the Flower Girl at all.

Ning Que preferred pretty girls around his age. He was also fine with women a bit older, even the ladies past thirty were acceptable, but Master Jian did not belong to any of the three category. She was only a normal woman past her forties and was calm like a man.

Ning Que was slightly surprised and realized that his current attitude was some what impolite. He forced himself to calm down, made a frank smile, and made a bow to salute for Madam Jian. "Hi Madam Jian, is there

anything I can do for you?"

"Who are you?" Madam Jian looked at him with a smile and asked.

Ning Que did not conceal anything and narrated his origin.

"Even though this year the military department recommended many people, the fact that you can pass the Academy's primary exam indicates that you have some talent."

Madam Jian looked at him approvingly and continued: "Since you came from the frontier, you probably don't know who I am. Although you don't know who I am, you can calm down quickly during the first meeting. Youngster, you have a steady mind."

It took Ning Que a lot of effort to avoid looking at Madam Jian. He intentionally looked down to avoid looking at her forehead and at her light hair above her lips. After hearing her comment, he subconsciously said some modest words.

From this lady's simple introduction and that maid's arrogant description, he eventually knew why the people downstairs would pay so much attention to the name Madam Jian.

Thirty years ago, when the Nan Jin emperor obtained the throne a dance club named the Red Sleeves won the most applause in the ceremony. Its fame gradually spread out the world. Three years later, the Red Sleeves was moved into the Tang empire because the Tang Emperor had personally wrote a letter asking the group to move to the Tang. Since

the Red Sleeves was mostly made up of Tang women, the Tang Emperor felt they should go back to the Tang Empire. The Nan Jin emperor had no power to resist and had to permit the move.

From then on, the Red Sleeves had always stayed in Chang An. In the recent twenty years, they only dance and sing for the Tang royal palace. They no longer participated in any other countries' famous events and ceremonies. Its fame in the public gradually faded.

However, to real nobles and high officials, the dance club that Tang specifically invited and stayed in the greatest city Chang An for many years was undoubtedly the best dance club in the world. Although the brothel they stayed in did not have a name, it was the number one brothel forever.

The Nan Jin ambassadors, Yue Lun officials who came to present tribute, or the barbarian prince from the grassland all went to the brothel and invited the Red Sleeves girls to sing a few songs and perform a few dances. As long as they visited and went to Chang An, they would visit the brothel before they leave. Based a legend, when Yan prince was sent to Chang An as a hostage seven years ago, he relied on the Red Sleeves to pass the two hardest years.

Madam Jian was the the Flower Girl.

But she was the head of the Red Sleeves dance club and she cultivated countless Flower Girls in the world.

.....

“You are only a youngster and since you want to enter the Academy, your future of course will be bright. Then why do you mimic those pedantic scholars and follow their views that people who do not go to brothels in their life can’t become celebrities?”

Madam Jina’s smile was like marks carved by knives. Whether she questioned, criticized, or persuaded Ning Que, her smile was always calm and the number of crows’ feet were always the same.

But Ning Que sensed the slight emotional change from Madam Jian. Previously when she called him over, her intentions was not clear. But after hearing her speak about him participating in the Academy’s entrance exam soon, the madam’s tone subconsciously became strict. Such strict tone was not animosity but more like elders wish for youngsters to improve.

Such emotional change made him not know what to do. He made a salute then explained a few sentences with a low voice.

(We Never know what Ning Que said and the next quote is from Madam Jian...)

“I am from Yue Lun, but I lived in Chang An for over two decades. Of course I know how you Tang men are. A positive aspect you guys have is generiosity, but a negative aspect of you guys is being over enthusiastic

and careing too much about reputation.”

Madam Jian’s smile had turned into a frown and she looked at Ning Que. Watching the youngster’s adolescent yet rigorous face, she felt as if she saw a little green gown scholar riding a black donkey while looking up and cursing as he walked into Chang An. Madam Jian warned Ning Que with much effort because she didn’t want Ning Que to walk down the wrong road as a scholar.

“Do you know who that rich young man is? He is the son of one of the Seven Riches of East City, Master Zhu’s sole son. He has infinitive money in his pocket. He can be generous, but how about you? Based on your Tang men’s personality, you will definitely treat back people who treated you. Even if you have no money, if you meet him next time, you will sell the books you have to treat him back. Am I right?”

Ning Que embarrassedly scratched his head. He admired the way this lady envisions events. Although he wasn’t a typical Tang man, he shared the Tang culture.

“The is a brothel and you haven’t even fully grown up yet. How can you walk into such a place?”

“You are already poor enough, but you still dare to waste money? Did you have enough money for food and dorm for the Academy yet?”

“How well have you prepared for the entrance exam? Did you buy the test prep questions? Which set of test prep questions did you buy?”

.....

Originally he was hoping to meet a Flower Girl, but he encountered an extremely moral Flower Girl's mother and got criticized harshly by this madam. If in other situation, Ning Que might have whisper in his heart: Even if you Madam Jian knew many nobles, possessed high statues, but you aren't my mother, how dare you scold me on your first time saw me?

Madam Jian was different and did not use power to suppress him, but rather like a diligent and nervous elder. A large word "pain" could be clearly seen on her face. He was really embarrassed to defend himself and could only reply carefully :

"It's my first time in Chang An.....I was just a little curious about many things. Before I was just going to take two glances secretly outside the building, but I didn't know that the girls in the building would laugh at me so I felt agitated....Then I walked in for no reason."

Madam Jian felt a little surprised. She then turned around and criticized coldly at the little maid: "The emperor is going to give a banquet for the return of princess, it's such a big thing. I just want those coquettish girls stay calm for a few days, and seriously practice dancing, but they all can't bare it? How can they accost even a young student!"

The little maid replied yieldingly but she did not dare to refute at all.

Madam Jian rubbed the corners of her eyes, felt a bit tired, looked up and gave a glance at Ning Que who obediently stood by the door. She suddenly realized that when she previously simply glimpsed occasionally at the hall, she felt that the youngster had a similar temperament to a

man. She couldn't help but wanted to call him over and ask a few questions but for some reason she got angry and scold him instead.

More surprisingly, that youngster neither refute nor became mad at her. He simply stood obediently and let her scold him. She involuntarily laughed, waved her hand and said, "Since you are curious, I'll let one take you to take a look. Afterwards you should go home rest early."

.....

Chapter 40: A carefree youngster around the lake

Although Madam Jian turned into Nanny Jian, she gave a suggestion to him at the very least. Ning Que wouldn't reject her invitation to pretend to be innocent. He didn't forget the actual purpose that he had for searching the brothels in the capital. As a youngster who came from the rural areas and could visit the best brothel in the capital, he was very satisfied.

Walking down from the stairs of the western room, there was a flat grassfield behind the building. A thin stone path crosses a white fence and a brook appeared under the star lights. On the two sides of the brook were a few small houses and faintly songs could be heard coming from them. It was clear that the dancers for the royal rituals were practicing in them.

The personal maid wasn't particularly happy after been rebuked and when she saw Ning Que walking around with his two hands on his back like a tourists viewing his scenes, her expression turned even colder. She mocked "Madam Jian is acting weird today, treating a poor student like you so nicely. If you are intellectual, then why didn't you pretend to reject the offer? Well that's right, people as poor as you still want to visit brothels. For sure someone has a thick skin."

Since he was been called a thick skin, Ning Que has to act like a thick skinned person. He pretended to not understand the mocking between the maid's lines and replied softly. "Since Sir Zhu was willing to pay for me, then I wouldn't want to reject his good will. That was something between two men. It may sound complex, but it was actually simple.

"You are just a boy calling himself a man," the maid continued mocking. "Paying for a few cups of wine was fine, but letting him pay for a woman too? He is not a relative of yours. How are you even able to stand to do that?"

Hearing the maid talk about being a man and a boy, Ning Que instinctively thought back to the first time he saw Li Yu at the small house in Wei City. At that time Li Yu wasn't the princess but rather just a maid. Today another maid was talking about the same topic. Although that event occurred not too long ago, why did it feel like something it happened a few years back.

The maid has already returned to the royal palace. Countless officials and citizens were busy preparing for her return. He himself also arrived at Chang An and somehow started to visit brothels and heard the songs especially made for her return before her. After thinking about this, he could help but started laughing.

"What is so funny?" The maid wrinkled her eyebrows and rebuked.

Ning Que waved his hands to show he has no bad intention. He just wanted to ask some questions and didn't want to waste this precious chance by arguing with this young maid.

After knowing how highly the officials viewed this Red Sleeve Dance Club, Ning Que faintly knew that Officer Zhang Yi Qi's secret place should be here. Only this place was secret and good enough for him.

But how should he go about and gather information? Pretending to be idiot or naive brat wasn't suitable. He started to talk about the random

and funny things that happened in the borderline city. He believed that these rough stories would be interesting to the maid who lived in the most prosperous city in the world.

To capture the hearts of characters like maids, Ning Que always had his techniques. This was unrelated to the princess in the royal palace but he always had the coldest little maid who didn't like to laugh beside him. An indifferent maid like Sang Sang was tamed by him. But of course this is from his own point of view and may not be true. To tame this maid of Madam Jian was not hard at all.

It wasn't a surprise to Ning Quest that after walking around the lake for a bit, the maid started to smile and talk. She excitedly exchanged gossips that were often talked about in the business. Ning Que learned about how the dance club came about. which girl in the back was the most popular, who was bought out by whom, and which girl's master was the biggest official in the government.

The prettier the girl, the easier it was for them to use beauty to make money because this method was very easy. The ratio of input to output was also truly amazing. The Flower Girls who came out of the Red Sleeves had an extremely high chance of becoming various nation's high status officials' concubines. One could make enough money for the rest of her life. Eventually she could even get a good home. Who wouldn't be willing?

When Madam Jian established the Red Sleeves, she also wanted it to be a clean dancing club. But in order to live in the patriarchal society, how could a seemingly famous and respectable dancing club resist pressure from various nations' nobles and even royal families? Therefore at last she could only yield to reality and began to cater to the reality.

The flowers on the trees next to the lake were blossoming. The starlights reflected in the flowing water broke into infinitive fragments. The world behind the white wall was so clean and pretty. Ning Que walked under the starlights like a poet, but watching such clean landscape he did not feel relaxed.

"Little youngsters don't have to worry."

Ning Que thought about the maid's comment for a while. He then shook his head and discarded the thoughts and emotions he had into the lake. As he walked along the lake, occasionally he would see pretty girls walking on the road and leaning on a side politely let them go through first. They appeared to be very courteous.

Like what's said in the previous text, a fifteen year old young student pretended to be mature would always let others feel funny. At least, funny ugly ones would make others feel disgusting, but if one's funny and immature then he would be cute.

After Ning Que arrived at Chang An, shower became much more convenient than in Wei City. His slightly curled black hair that was oily and dirty in the frontier was already washed by Sang Sang's hands and became very clean. Although he couldn't be considered handsome, his face was decent and looked naturally good.

Because the sour and spicy soup sold on the fouty street was too delicious and it tasted even better with several thin layers of beef, these days he and Sang Sang were mostly eating this dish. As a result he actually became a little fatter so now he looked very cute, extremely easy

to get others' favor.

Those girls who were given way by Ning Que looked curiously back at him. When they saw that he was clean and decent, they automatically treated him well when he walked by, but until they realized he was the one who came to the building because of their humiliations, they couldn't help but cover their mouth and laugh. The girls had seen many strange things in the building, but it's their first time seeing Madam Jian ordered people to take a youngster to visit the brothel. While they were curious and excited, they actually surrounded Ning Que and did not let him leave.

The little maid was being squeezed outside. Looking furiously inside, her heart was filled with a emotion of having her own toy taken away by older sisters. She angrily took the name Madam Jian out and shouted like a little tiger. "Don't mess with a little kid. This youngster is a student who wants to go to the Academy. He is also.....that thing. Are you guys actually willing to give the big red envelope! All spread out!"

"Yo yo yo, see how our Little Grass getting mad? We simply think this youngster is interesting, why are you so mad? Hmm, since he's actually a talented guy trying to get into the Academy, then we definitely should take a close look."

A speedy but somewhat husky voice came up. The crowd slightly spread out and a pretty and eye-dazzling woman walked out slowly. This woman was around twenty, had a full figure, and her hands, arms, and waist showed outside the dress were a little chubby. When she walked, it seemed like water was going to drop out.

Yet she had a small face, which concealed all of her chubbiness. Because of this people wouldn't feel that she was fat but instead surprisingly

appeared to be delicate and comely.

Seeing this woman, Ning Que's eyes suddenly lit up and shouted silently in his heart: it's her!

Chapter 41: The burning Dew on the Petal of Lotus

Right now, Ning Que was entirely seduced by the pretty ladies in the brothel. It seemed like he was a stupid duck that couldn't move his feet. After seeing the scene, the young maid got unhappier by the minute. She stared at the full grown woman and said, "Shui Zhu Er, you dare to not listen to your Grandmother?!"

Shui Zhu Er was a popular girl in the Red Sleeve Club. Although she didn't enter the competition for the flower girls, her pretty little face and white skin were enough to attract a lot of business. Even so, she couldn't disobey the command of Madam Jian. With this, she walked up to Ning Que with a smile on her face. She held his hands and said, "If it was the rule set by Grandmother, then I dare not disobey. But just looking at this boy makes me happy. I like the shininess of this kid the best. Come, come play with me in the yard."

Obviously Ning Que didn't object such an invitation. He let her hold his hands and got dragged to a small house in the garden. The ladies behind them were jokingly mocking them, but they didn't try to stop them. Except a young maid yelled out, "Grandmother said, no one could do business with him!"

"What? Did she actually say that?"

Ning Que was surprised and he turned around and thought to himself, with Madam Jian's status in the brothel business, if her word spreads in the business, then none of the brothels in Chang An will do business with him. How could this be?

Maid Xiao Cao looked at him with pleasure, "So she didn't mean that?"

Ning Que was left speechless. No wonder the history books say that emperors may not be necessarily scary, but the servants who lied about the Emperor's Orders were the most annoying people. Just thinking about his future, tear drops formed a raging river – but even then, he had to follow that lady named Shui Zhu Er.

After entering the small house, nothing erotic happened. Lady Shui Zhu Er sat on her sheets and told her maid to bring all kinds of fruits to welcome Ning Que. She, herself, was eating some seeds and asked him about his talk with Madam Jian. Afterwards, she asked about the situation at the borderline.

Ning Que was familiar with this kind of talk. He trained his ways with words in the tavern of Wei City and the gambling places in the military camp. Tonight, he first battled Madam Jian then he comforted the young maid. Now, he was against a popular prostitute in Chang An and he was not afraid. He ate the fruits naturally and chatted carefreely with her as if he was still at home.

His purpose for chatting was to obtain information. Shui Zhu Er didn't notice it but after she ate half plate of seed, their topic changed from Wei City to Chang An. They started chatting about topics from the barbarian girls to the guests of Red Sleeve Club. They conversed about who was the most jealous and whose wife was the most jealous.

Talking about the guests behind their back may seem professionally inappropriate, but to see the truth, it was actually something that the ladies in the brothels enjoyed when they were not working. Shui Zhu Er didn't feel anything wrong with it. In fact, she started to enjoy the

chatting more and more.

Ning Que lowered his head to pick out the fruits on his plate. Although it seemed that he wasn't paying much attention and was just asking about random things, his ears were actually focused and his mind was filtering the different names that went into his ears. Suddenly his fingers stopped.

"I never saw a person who was that scared of his wife. He is just an official ranked about fourth of fifth, but every time he visits the brothel, he need to change his attire and hide his identity. Plus, he wasn't even that able either though his mouth skills were nice. It's no wonder he was a talkative censor....."

The talkative characteristic of the censor was used so negatively by the ladies in the brothels. Suddenly, Ning Que remembered the satisfied expressions of the wives of Zhang Yi Qi. With an image of the old censor lying between his wives' legs and working hard in his mind, he nearly coughed the fruits in his mouth out. He choked a little from holding back his laughter.

Just after saying her words, Shui Zhu Er realized that her comment was inappropriate. She thought the young boy wouldn't understand what she meant and she didn't expect his reaction to be this strong. She now knew that Ning Que understood everything and felt a little embarrassed. She acted as if she was angry and she punched him in the shoulder. She blushed and said, "What are you guys doing all day in the borderline? I didn't know a young kid like you would understand such things."

After laughing and chatting a little, a servant maid walked to Shui Zhu Er and whispered something into her ears. Ning Que looked out of the

window and noticed it was night, it was time to go. He stood up and greeted sincerely.

Shui Zhu Er closed her lips and thought for a moment. She took out a silver piece from a box around her pillow and smiled, "It's not a big red envelop, but I can't waste your time chatting with me. Don't think little of me, but I don't know why, I feel easy when I talk with you."

Ning Que thought it was only natural. When she talk with the guests, she needs to be intellectual and smooth. She couldn't just lie on her sheet and curse every three sentences like she was talking with Ning Que. But he also liked Shui Zhu Er's lively characteristic andher pretty face and nice body. Ning Que didn't reject her gift and accepted the silver piece and said, "I'll treat this as a gift from a sister."

After hearing this, Shui Zhu Er's eyes brightened. She went up and hugged him and rubbed his head. She smiled happily and said, "I don't know why Grandmother wanted to look at you, but if you aren't busy, come visit me."

She worked in the brothel business and Ning Que was a student. Although they could talk side by side in the small house of the brothel, in the outside world they are two different kinds of people. She was happy that Ning Que called her sister, but she couldn't accept his status as a brother – a woman of Chang An, even a prostitute of Chang An has her own pride and limit.

After returning to the shop of Forty Seventh Street, he was told casually

by Sang Sang that two people had come in the afternoon and asked if the boss was there. Ning Que didn't care much and asked Sang Sang to boil a pot of hot water to warm up his legs.

The lamp in the house was extinguished and darkness filled the room. Just like usual, Ning Que hugged her small feet in his chest, but his head was thinking about the things he saw and heard in the Red Sleeve Club. First he thought about censorer Zhang Yi Qi, but afterwards he mostly thought about Shui Zhu Er's pretty, white face and her soft and young skin. Especially when she hugged him, Ning Que could still feel the soft sensation and fragrance.

Just thinking about this, Ning Que got hotter. His hands that held Sang Sang's small feet also got hotter. After his knees touched the flat place where it would be round in the future, Ning Que thought the temperature in the blanket was way too hot.

People will grow eventually and they couldn't continue sleeping together in the same bed. Ning Que flipped over the blanket and sat up, he looked at the girl who was woken up by him and laughed, "Chang An is hotter than the borderline. It seems like we should split bed soon."

Sang Sang rubbed her eyes and said confused, "But there is no warm stove here, I feel even colder than back home."

Chapter 42: The Regret of Censorer Zhang Yi Qi

To find out when censor Zhang Yi Qi would visit the brothel, what his entrance route would be, what his departure time would be, and other details, Ning Que had to visit the brothel named Red Sleeve Club repeatedly over the past few days. But since he couldn't let the others know of his true intentions while still gathering more information, he spent most of his time in the brothel playing and chatting.

He got closer and closer with the lady named Shui Zhu Er. He visited so frequently that even other ladies and servers in the building got used to his presence. Since Madam Jian payed special attention to him, no one dared to say much about him.

But ever since Xiao Cao sent out the fake message from Madam Jian, Ning Que could only hug or hold hands with the ladies in the brothel. He could not do much with the ladies which was why he didn't pay much. But even a thick-faced person like him needed to give tip to the maids and the servants. Because of the spending, after a while, Sang Sang noticed the large sum of money that was being withdrawn from the shop.

When Ning Que returned that night, Sang Sang questioned his spendings and what he was doing. Ning Que didn't try to cover up his actions. He explained his intentions to Sang Sang and why he spent his time in the brothel. "Only after I became a regular customer will I not get suspected by the government when some stuff happens in the brothel. If I just visited there just once and coincidentally censor Zhang Yi Qi dies during that visit, the government of Chang An will be suspicious enough to track me down."

Then he laughed and continued. "After I finish up my business, then obviously I wouldn't need to waste my time in that brothel anymore and no more money will be spent."

"Why do I feel like you would miss that place?"

Sang Sang raised her small head and looked at him. She suggested sincerely, "but if you stopped visiting that brothel after the censor died, wouldn't that attract suspicion from others?"

Ning Que thought about it for a moment and noticed that this would be a problem. But instead of being irritated, he was relieved. He rubbed her head and said "If this is true, then I need to visit that place a few more times after I finished the job. Go check how much money we have left."

Sang Sang agreed and was ready to do her favorite job in this world: counting money. Suddenly Ning Que thought of something and stopped her. He took out a box of rouge and make-up and after hesitating for a moment, he handed it to her. "This is a gift from Shui Zhu Er of the brothel. She.....is a nice person."

In actuality, Ning Que had asked Shui Zhu Er embarrassingly for this box of rouge because he wanted to make Sang Sang happy. And his comment on Shui Zhu Er was used to reassure Sang Sang. Otherwise, Sang Sang might think that the gift was dirty because of the jobs of the ladies in the brothel.

Sang Sang took the box of rouge and happiness filled her small dark face. The only expression that filled her eyes was gratefulness. "I've heard that the ladies in the brothels have their own unique recipe, some of

them are even better than those in the Chen Jin Shop."

"Do you like it?" Ning Que smiled and looked at her.

Sang Sang's two arms wrapped around the box tightly and she raised her face to look at him. Although she wasn't willing to open her mouth to answer him, a trace of smile had already climbed up her face and lips.

After putting the box of rouge with the previously purchased make-up from the Chen Jin Shop together, Sang Sang boiled hot water and washed Ning Que and her feet. Then Sang Sang made two beds of blankets and climbed in after undressing herself. She whispered faintly that it was too cold without the hot stove.

Even as the night darkened, Sang Sang couldn't fall asleep. She stared at the roof and her eyes were as shiny as a crystal. Suddenly she asked, "Master, that Censor.... when will he visit that brothel?"

Ning Que was silent for a long time. Then he answered quietly, "Tomorrow."

Sang Sang didn't know that Chang An was a more dangerous hunting ground than Mountain Min and the Great Plain. Therefore she didn't worry about her master's safety. However, she was worried about some other things. She held the corner of her blanket tightly, looked at the other side of the bed and said sincerely, "Master, if that censor is going to die tomorrow, shouldn't you tell him the reason before he dies?"

"True," Ning Que looked at the ceiling and wrinkled his eyebrows, "In

revenge.....if he doesn't even know what I'm avenging for before he dies, it's kind of boring."

"Then tell him about it."

"Because of some reason, then I will represent the Heaven to punish you?.....Wouldn't this line be kind of random and not sincere? Is there any serious, or stylish way to do this?"

Sang Sang wrinkled her eyebrows and thought hard about how to solve this problem. After a little bit, she nodded heavily on her pillow and said, "Master, write a poem."

"Poem? I'm not good at that kind of stuff."

"Then can I write one?"

"Sure."

Sang Sang read a poem out loud that she just made up. Ning Que listened closely and then thought about it, finally he said, "this poem is way better than anything I could make up."

The Tang censor of the Department of Censor, ranked vice sixth official, responsible for investigating officials, and impeaching the corrupted ones. While he didn't have a rank yet, his power was not insignificant.

With such a good position, most people would be satisfied but Zhang Yi Qi was never satisfied. It was because thirteen years ago, he was already a censor who was supposed to have a bright future. However, despite staying in this position for such a long time, he is still just a useless censor.

However, he never dared to even show a hint of dissatisfaction because he knew that the real reason why his path in government was hindered was because he had participated in general Lin Guang Yuan's case the other year. After that, the speed of his ranking up slowed down. His last gain was seven years ago in the Yan slaughter village case where he moved from being deputy governor to censor. After that, he had not move up even a single rank!

For doing things for the princess and General Xia Hou, he should not have faced such a consequence in return. If these two people at such high positions did not want the past to be known, then they should have found a way to kill him instead of leaving him alive in the Department of Censor. Weren't they supposed to worry that if Zhang Yi Qi had resentment that he would revealed that thing?

For his dark path, Zhang Yi Qi thought hard for two years until four years ago, he finally understood and felt very cold all over his body.

Making a censor with a bright future suddenly sink, easily breaking the future path that the princess and Xia Hou built for him and not letting anyone see any trace of action, only one person in Tang could do so, that was the Emperor.

In people's eyes, even though the Tang Emperor was not corrupted, when compared to the previous emperors, he appeared to be somewhat

conservative and even cowardly.

It's kind of crazy to say but the strongest evidence that everyone made this conclusion from was: since Emperor held power, the Empire was not as tough and impolite but rather began to become rational and courteous.

Even though the big reason he was always holding in Tang's hand, yet a robber who was willing to talk about reasons, would always look cuter in the eyes of hostage and fat sheeps.*

Yet Zhang Yi Qi and most other government officials knew clearly that their Emperor was definitely not a conservative and cowardly person.

It was only because the Emperor loved calligraphy and literature since his childhood that he hid some scholar's temperaments under his golden dragon robe. Therefore, his personality could be described as somewhat gentle and lazy.

The Emperor's last name was Li, what flowed inside his body was the Tang royal family's arrogant and brutal blood. If anyone dared to touch his basis, they would definitely see the true anger of the Son of Heaven.

In Xuan general's treason case and the Yan slaughter village case, all the sketchy evidence was deleted. The Emperor did not seem to believe his officials' investigation but without evidence, even he, the one who was sitting on the dragon chair, was too lazy to reverse the conviction. With this, the suspected officials was left with no future in their lives.

The prince was the Emperor's little brother, Xia Hou was the Emperor's great General, so the Emperor could bare them only temporarily. In comparison, was the censor, Zhang Yi Qi even a thing?

*Edittor explanation: We decided to keep the sentence in the translation to keep the authenticity of the piece but for those that want a better explanation, it is basically saying the Tang Empire looks "cuter" or weaker than it actually is because the Emperor is too lazy to be more aggressive or to be more involved.

Chapter 43: The Entrance of Censor Zhang Yi Qi

Realizing that the Emperor was the one who was obstructing his career advancement, Zhang Yi Qi became hopeless and gave up his goal to climb the government ladder to obtain more political power. Instead, he put his whole heart into enjoying worldly pleasures. He was able to visit the famous brothels in Chang An every now and then despite the pressures given by his bold wife and the concubines in his house.

But to drown in worldly pleasures, he needed financial and political support. Zhang Yi Qi didn't want anyone to exploit the fact that he was into prostitution. Using prostitutes as a censor wasn't exactly a big issue, but if he were to be caught doing this, the Emperor in the royal palace wouldn't mind taking away his position and exiling him. For this reason, every time the censor left his mansion to seek pleasure, he had to be extremely careful, like a thief stealing from the police department.

It is no exaggeration to say that Zhang Yi Qi exercised the most caution when visiting brothels among the Chang An officials. He was definitely the hardest to catch. For this reason, Zhuo Er was never able to find which brothel Zhang Yi Qi visited regularly and Ning Que had to spend several days and dozens of silver coins to track him down.

A carriage stopped outside of the side door to the Red Sleeve. The censor Zhang Yi Qi disguised himself as a regular rich man. He walked out of his carriage and through the door. He waved behind him and his servants went into some restaurants in the same street to wait for their master to finish his business.

After Zhang Yi Qi entered, he gestured for the waiters to lead the way.

Following a stone path hidden in the bamboo forest that led to a certain house around the lake, Zhang Yi Qi entered the yard. The censor could finally be a regular customer instead of an official. The worried expression on his face changed into a carefree and relaxed expression.

He had been here many times and so, he obviously didn't need anyone to escort him here. He wasn't afraid of the fact that someone might see him because the back of the Red Sleeve building comprised of separate houses that were extremely private. In addition to this, Zhang Yi Qi always reserves a spot before visiting so that he wouldn't be embarrassed when he met someone he knew.

Everyone knew Madam Jian had connections in the Chang An government. In fact, Madam Jian had a very good relationship with the queen who managed the brothel. Besides the fourth princess who had just returned from the Great Plains, no one would dare challenge Madam Jian.

Madam Jian was a truly unique character. First, she was invited by the previous emperor from Nan Ji, where she established Red Sleeve as the best dance group in the world. In the past few years, she taught a countless number of Flower Girls and captured the best beauties in the industry. What made Zhang Yi Qi respect her the most was that a person like her was able to enter the palace freely. Rumors say that Madam Jian was treated like a sister by the queen!

Walking on the stone path and watching the small house get closer and closer, Zhang Yi Qi thought about the story of Madam Jian. He thought the person who was able to please Madam Jian would have his path to political power paved and polished. In fact, if it were not for his reputation, he would be willing to ask for help.

But what the censor didn't know was that just a few days ago, Madam Jian had gained interest in a youngster who had just entered Chang An. Although she wasn't exactly pleased with him or his actions, they had at least met and talked to each other. What he didn't realize was that this youngster was leaning on a handle on the third floor and smiling at the sight of the censor's back.

Although Ning Que made a rough plan that wouldn't drag Shui Zhu Er into the mess, he wanted to be safe so he had to arrive early at the Red Sleeve. He had been waiting since the afternoon. However, he didn't go into Shui Zhu Er's small house like he did usually. Instead, he chatted with the young maid, Xiao Cao. Xiao Cao was surprised and asked him pleasantly with a trace of embarrassment if he had walked to the wrong place.

The moment Zhang Yi Qi entered from the side door, Ning Que noticed him. Having stalked this censor for days on end, Ning Que found it hard to forget how the censor's back looked like. He smiled and glanced at the image as it disappeared into the bamboo forest, but Ning Que didn't do anything. He didn't want to drag Shui Zhu Er into his mess, so he didn't even enter her small house. Obviously, he couldn't choose to act in the Official's small house either.

"I'll just let this old thing enjoy a little pleasure in the last moment of his life."

Ning Que watched his target's back image and suddenly remembered the words Shui Zhu Er said that night. He then thought of the perverted things the censors was going to do next. He shivered and thought to himself, "And give you one last chance to serve the girls?"

The maid Xiao Cao, who was busy serving Madam Jian, smiled after receiving the box of oranges from Ning Que and left. Ning Que smiled a little but still stood at the third floor watching the sunset, the bamboo, and the pink walls.

After Ning Que calculated and knew that it was about time, he casually found the back stairs and circled to the side door. After seeing the marked carriage, he walked towards it and pressed his hands on the wheels.

The horse in the front of the wheels turned its head and looked at him confused. Ning Que had lived in the Wei City for many years and had traveled on the Great Plains a countless amount of times. One of his best skills was treating horses and sheep. He slapped lightly on the horse's butt and the confused horse turned friendly. It comfortably stepped on the ground with its hooves .

The guard in the restaurant instinctively looked at the carriage for a second but discovering nothing unusual, he lowered his head to eat the food he had just ordered.

Every house has a wooden barrel for showering. But Zhang Yi Qi liked to go to the sauna room around the side door after he was done with his business. He liked to get his back rubbed so that he could regenerate some stamina and the room made him feel comfortable. In addition, it was easy to finish and leave for the carriage.

It was the same today. The censor randomly showered himself, wore his pants, and laid on the cotton bed waiting for the usual woman to come and rub his back.

The lotion required for the back rubbing needed time to prepare. He expected the wait. But as he waited, he recalled the erotic scenes he had previously seen in the small house and thought back to the nice body of Shui Zhu Er. His body got hotter, but his face was filled with displeasure.

Lady Shui Zhu Er again rejected his request to serve him individually. Zhang Yi Qi's mood was terrible and he whispered harshly to himself, "You are just a damn prostitute who is full of herself. I spent so much money on you and you rejected me so many times."

"You resent my low rank? Obviously, a woman with no brains. I am a censor of vice sixth rank. If placed in another department, I can exchange for a fourth ranked, no! A vice third rank!"

Just this moment, the door was pushed open by someone.

Foot steps could be heard walking towards the bed.

Zhang Yi Qi stopped complaining and closed his eyes and waited to enjoy his massage. When the warm towel touched his back, he couldn't help but moan a little.

But immediately, he couldn't moan anymore.

Another burning hot towel was squeezed directly into his mouth and his

hands and legs were wrapped and tightened onto the short bed.

Chapter 44 The despair of Censor Zhang Yi Qi

Zhang Yi Qi started struggling for his life. His fat body was moving like a disgusting caterpillar on the short bed. He tried to scream for help but his mouth was stuffed by a towel.

There were unique dead knots that tied his hands to the bed. The wild boar in Mountain Min couldn't struggle itself out of this type of knot after one night, much less this old and sick body. No matter how hard he struggled, his efforts turned to waste. His actions were silly as well; his scream for help wasn't much louder than the noise of a mosquito.

Zhang Yi Qi discovered that he was totally helpless. Because he was a Tang Official that ignored the injustice for hundreds of lives, he actually able to calm himself down in such a critical situation. He stopped struggling and started listening closely to the surrounding sounds.

There was a person in the room, and clearly that person didn't want to hide his presence either. His foot steps could be heard clearly behind Zhang Yi Qi and they were getting closer. Zhang Yi Qi wanted to see who dared to do this but suddenly he remembered one thing and his body froze. He used all of his energy under this terrifying situation..... and closed his eyes tightly.

A criminal who dared to kidnap a customer in the Red Sleeve Club was no ordinary criminal. If the criminal knew Zhang Yi Qi saw his face, then Zhang Yi Qi had no chance of surviving. Yes, even though he was a censor, in the history of Tang, many officials died in the hands of reckless men!

"This wasn't as fun as I expected it to be. I thought after I stuffed your mouth you wouldn't try to say that you don't like this kind of play, then I could use this thing in my hand and let you feel the pain and pleasure at the same time. I never thought you would calm down this quickly. Alright, open your eyes."

The voice was crispy. It contained a trace of mocking in its calmness. It didn't sound like a criminal talking but instead, it sounded like a youngster who was joking with someone in the streets of Chang An.

Zhang Yi Qi didn't want to fall for the trap and his eyes were still tightly shut. His eyes were closed so hard that the middle of his eyebrows started to hurt. But even then he didn't want to open his eyes. However, he kept on guessing the identity of this young man and why he was trying to harm him.

"Open your eyes, or I will actually use this thing in my hand as if you dropped the soap." That young voice was calm but determined.

Zhang Yi Qi didn't dare to keep on guessing the youngster's intent and opened his eyes in fear and looked to the front.

There was a youngster half squatted in front of the bed, smiling as he stared at the old man, as if he saw an old friend from a foreign land. At the same time though, he was holding a two inch long table leg in his hand. In this situation, with such an attentive look, Ning Que unavoidably looked somewhat crazy—

Ning Que seriously looked at the censor's red face, smiled mildly, and said "I will untie the towel on your mouth, but please control your volume. If you are loud, I will have to kill you immediately. I know that many Tang officials don't fear death but they definitely don't include you."

In Zhang Yi Qi's eyes, such an immature face and such a warm smile ironically gave off a very cold feeling. The opponent did not cover his face, which meant that he was not worried about letting him see him, or maybe he wanted him to see him. These were the only two possibilities: the youngster had a very great background and completely did not worry about the censor's anger after being humiliated, or....he wanted to kill him.

"Is there any hostile thing between us?"

Zhang Yi Qi forced himself to suppress his fear and asked, recalling quickly his foes in politics and the offsprings of the officials he punished before. But he found out sadly that in the recent few years, he was suppressed ruthlessly by the emperor to the edge of the court, so he did not have the ability to offend anyone.

"In a common story, at this moment, many avengers will say, there's no hostility between us, I'm just trying to help everyone in the world, to represent the Heaven and kill you treacherous court officials, but unfortunately....."

Ning Que shook his head and said, "there's actually hostility between us. Therefore I am not one of those people who represent justice; I'm just an insignificant guy who bears a grudge on you."

"You are so young, how can there be hostility between us?"

Ning Que coughed and then began using his most emotional tone, most saturated spirit to slowly recite, "I come from the mountains, to take your life; I come from the river, to take your life; I come from the grasslands, to take your life; I come from the unmanned little village in Yan, to take your life; I come from the uninhabited General's mansion in Chang An, to take your life."

Hearing the two sentences about the unmanned little village in Yan and the uninhabited general's mansion in Chang An, Zhang Yi Qi almost passed out. Finally, he knew the hostility that existed between the youngster and him. But it was already too late.

If constant praises could make the opponent stop seeking vengeance, he wouldn't mind to use the best poems in Tang to applaud him but he knew it was impossible. The slaughtering of the village and the death of the entire Xuan Wei general's family were hostilities that could not be resolved in the world.

Zhang Yi Qi looked hopelessly at the youngster and knew that he could not live today but he wanted to buy some time so he cried and said, "Someone ordered me to do it, I'm just...."

He prepared to shout out for help as he believed that if the seemingly hopeless beg for mercy eventually became a scream for help, then the youngster would not be able to react fast enough. He believed that as long as he spoke the word help, his guardian or the hatchet man in the brothel would respond. At that point, the youngster will die with him too,

or even....probably the youngster would forget to kill him.

This plan looked very promising but the censor who lived in Chang An for so long did not know how cautious Mian Mountain hunters are with seemingly dead prey even before they actually cut the prey's meat and separate the prey's skin. When he just about to breathe, as the air in his lungs was still very far away from his vocal cords, Ning Que's hand was already out.

The iron-like hand harshly stabbed into Zhang Yi Qi's throat. His skin did not look broken at all, but the tenders inside were already fragmented.

Ning Que stood up, took out a nail which he casually picked up from somewhere, aimed at a point on the back of the censor's brain, put up the rusty yet still sharp nail point and used his right hand to harshly punch down the table leg.

Pu, like the sound of grassland barbarians using sharp knives to pierce the bag that was filled with wine, the rusty iron nail penetrated through Zhang Yi Qi's skull and stabbed in completely.

Ning Que quickly put a white towel on the back of his brain, to the place where the rusty nail penetrated into the skull. He used his two hands to press down the towel hard. His two feet tiptoed and he used all of his power and because he pressed so hard, the bed began to make a sound as if it were about to break.

Chapter 45: The Death of Censorer Zhang yi Qi

A moment later Ning Que stopped putting pressure. He took off the towel and viewed the back of Zhang Yi Qi's head carefully. He used his finger to check the wound that was caused when the rusted nail penetrated the skull creating an extremely tiny wound just beneath the hair. The small blood drop had already solidified. It would be hard to discover the true reason for death without looking at the wound carefully and with light.

Ning Que lowered his head and checked the towel in his hand. There was a blood stain in the middle of the white towel, a little dark like a rotten berry.

But the weird thing was that Zhang Yi Qi didn't die immediately. He was still struggling on the short bed due to the pain he was enduring. He tried to scream but his voice was weak and hoarse. His eyeballs kept rolling upward and showed most of the whites of his eyes. It looked terrifying.

The only thing he felt was the extreme pain from the back of his head. He thought Ning Que used a stick and swung at him. Little did he know that an iron nail was already inside his brain, or he would've been horrified to death.

"You need to be prepared for death when you followed someone's order. But.....if you can make it to your carriage, then maybe you can still live."

After informing the censorer, Ning Que unwrapped the towels holding his arms and legs down and threw them into a basket beside the bed.

Then he disappeared into the fast approaching darkness of night.

When people hear anything when they are near death, they would think it is the last log in the roaring stream and follow the order. Especially at this moment the censorer was already under great pain and lost all ability of judgement. Even if he still had a little conscious left, it would only be the instinct to live. It didn't matter if that crazy youngster would release him or not, he would definitely seek safety at his own carriage.

Ning Que stood in a bamboo forest not too far away from the side door and watched. He noticed that it was a little later than he had expected and wrinkled his eyebrows

Right when he was about to start worrying, he saw Zhang Yi Qi trembled out of the side door and his supposed naked body was covered by clothing. His body shook violently and his eyes were already loose. He opened his mouth and tried to yell something but nothing came out of it. Zhang Yi Qi was like a drunk man, or rather like a fish about to die from thirst.

The face of the servants waiting beside the carriage outside of the side door was filled with worry but he didn't notice anything wrong. He yelled loudly, "Master, I heard that your wife got the message and knows you are here. She is about to bring other women here and start something bad, we have to go!"

Zhang Yi Qi rushed toward the carriage while his feet were shaking weakly. He seemed to be able to get to his destination but couldn't handle the last few steps. He hopelessly reached out his shaking arms and tried to grab that servant's clothing. His pale face was seizing and twisted.

Perhaps that terrifying expression scared the horse. Hearing a loud crash, Ning Que saw the carriage collapse!

The structure of the carriage collapsed and fell apart like a lego piece. It pushed Zhang Yi Qi all the way down like a small mountain.

After the dust was settled, the few servants and guards stood beside the broken carriage dumbstruck and looked at their master's face. He was bleeding all over and had already stopped breathing. They didn't know what really happened.

Yes, we know that your wife is bold and fearsome and today you had drank a lot of liquor which amplified that fear. Hearing us yelling you ran a little too fast, but how....how could you just crashed straight into the carriage!?? And how come this carriage was so weak that it collapsed with just one crash!??

The noises from the side door already alerted the workers in the Red Sleeve Club. They circled around the incident area with a grim face and didn't listen to the vague explanations from the servants and guards. They directly held everyone present in the field and sent messengers to the police department of Chang An.

The unrelated people circling around the area didn't know who the fat guy that got crushed by the carriage was. They thought he was just a sad customer who was unlucky. They pointed at his body and discussed his identification. But the workers of the Red Sleeve Club knew who he was.

How could they explain that a censorer has died in front of their building?

Censorer Zhang Yi Qi became the first official who was so scared of his wife that he died in a hurry to get onto the carriage and was crushed by it in the history of Tang.

But when the censorer was finishing up the last race in his life, his true murderer Ning Que was standing in the shadow and was squeezing his hands tightly. He kept on cheering for him to run faster and faster.

Back when he was in the Great Plain and learning how to dissect a bull from the barbarians, he knew that there would be a short phase of consciousness after the small brain was damaged by a sharp blade. He tried this many times but it was his first time doing it on a person. He didn't know how long this physically weak censorer could last, and it was like a small gamble. But scaring the horse and breaking down the carriage was no big deal to Ning Que.

"One cannot underestimate the will of a corrupt official to live."

Watching Zhang Yi Qi successfully run to the carriage and crushed by the carriage, Ning Que sighed and turned to leave quickly. He wiped the sweat on his forehead with a white towel.

It was his first time killing a person in Chang An. It was inevitable that he was a little nervous. But right now he was preoccupied with when Zhang Yi Qi finally rushed out of the room, there was clothing on him. Even in such a threatening situation, the censors didn't want anyone to see him naked and cared about his face so much. For sure he was a role model of preserving face and a pig in disguise.

Now the managers of the Red Sleeve Club heard about the incident and countless eyes were trying to find any suspicious details. Obviously Ning Que wouldn't leave right now to attract those suspicions onto himself. He followed the lake and walked to the small house of a lady and chatted with her. Perhaps she was bored, when she saw him coming she was extremely happy. Ning Que was happy as well and talked with a smile on his face. Sometimes he would wipe the corner of his mouth with the towel that seemed clean but hid a rotten berry inside.

The night has fallen over the Forty Seventh Street. The master and maid in the back house of the Old Brush was talking about the event that occurred earlier. The bowl beside the bed was filled with ashes left over from burning the towel.

Sang Sang was covered tightly under the cotton blanket on the other side of the bed. She asked curiously, "If this was called 'creating false incident area', then why didn't you fake that he got Ma Shang Feng?"

Ning Que asked surprisingly, "You know what Ma Shang Feng is?"

"Nope, but I heard it when you were telling me stories when I was young."

"I told such stories? All right, maybe I forgot."

"If the censorer got Ma Shang Feng in the brothel, then why wouldn't

his wife continue to bother the police? Why wouldn't the government continue investigating? If this event reached the actual smart people in the police department, I'm not that confident in myself to get out of this."

(Ma Shang Feng means to die from over excitement during sexual intercourse. I left it in ping ying because Sang Sang wasn't suppose to know what it meant)

"Therefore our most important goal is to make the police department of Chang An think it was just an accident – only accidents wouldn't bother the government – but most importantly, this conclusion is the easiest one for the police department to silence the department of censorer."

Sang Sang was silent for a long time and spoke embarrassingly, "I don't understand, it's too complicated. Master you think about too much stuff."

"And that's why you don't think for yourself?" Ning Que acted as he was Madam Jian and criticized, "You could only get dumber and dumber if you don't think."

Sang Sang replied honestly, "I'm a girl, it's fine to be a little dumb. Don't people always say dumb girl, dumb girl?"

Ning Que was speechless, he was silent for a moment and then asked with concern, "Are you tired from sending messages to both sides? Did

anyone in the Zhang Mansion see you?"

"Don't worry." Sang Sang replied.

Chapter 46 Chang An's Dismantler

In the late night, Ning Que lied on bed, opened up his eyes widely and looked at the ceiling. Naturally he thought that, if Little Black was still alive, then he did not need Sang Sang to take the risk of delivering the message to Zhang's mansion.

There weren't much noteworthy things to conclude about today's assassination. To him, after preparing for many days, it was very easy to kill an old censor who did not even have a guardian. After the nail was punched into Zhang Yi Qi's head, the man was already dead. It definitely wouldn't leave any useful information behind that could potentially reveal Ning Que. The actions he made later were just extra, like what he explained to Sang Sang, a censor dying from traffic incident was at least more proper than dying on a prostitute's bed to the government.

As for the feeling of killing a man? He did not have much feeling towards it. His life in Tang began with a murder, he grew from infinitive cases of murders, he killed many people, he used many ways to kill people, he knew more methods of killing that were more bloody and violent than the one he used today. After killing, would he get scared nausea or be afraid of the darkness? Such conditions would only appear on the scholars who were reading poems and essays all day, but for him, although he was about to participate in the entrance exam to the Academy, deep into his bone, he wasn't a scholar at all.

— He was a hunter who killed an old hunter. He was a horse gangster who killed little horse gangsters. He was an inborn killer.

But today, the person killed, after all, was a high official of Tang. Chen

Cheng Shang had this goal for years. In his eyes, he saw blood flow in the general mansion when he was four — the old butler and the little kid's surprised yet lifeless eyes. Ning Que smiled happily as he felt that a slight part of the gloom between his chest and belly finally left.

At the other side of the bed, Sang Sang's little face was also filled with a smile. She knew that he definitely felt really happy today and therefore, she decided to wait until master killed all of his foes including General Xia Hou before taking out the little box under her bed and showing it to him. She believed that at that time, after she saw the paper, he would definitely feel different than he did now.

Inside the box was writing that Ning Que randomly discarded over the years. In Sang Sang's eyes, they were very good. Among them, the newest was the piece that Ning Que wrote on the night Zhuo Er died. Ning Que thought that he already mixed that paper with garbage long time ago, how could he imagine that her little maid secretly hid it.

After remained quiet for a long time, Ning Que suddenly sighed and said a bit unfortunately, "Last night hearing the poem you wrote, I didn't feel that anything was improper, but today after I spoke in front of that kid, I felt somewhere was not right. And after thinking closely about it, I feel that it was kind of stupid."

He was obviously talking about the poem "I come from somewhere, come to take your life," simple repetition, intentional emphasis, and awkward words. It's even worse than a doggerel. Yet the master and maid couple obviously lacked intelligence in the literary aspect, so on the night they were making the poem, they both liked it.

"Then let me change it more." Sang Sang answered extremely seriously,

“Master when do you plan to kill the second person? Tell me the time. I promise I will make it better before that day.”

Finish revising before the deadline? Why did it feel like writing a glorious masterpiece? Ning Qie thought, then laughed and answer, “If so, then you don’t have to rush. The second name on the paper is a little troublesome, I am not planning to kill him soon. Wait for the Zhang Yi Qi’s thing to settle down a bit. I also have to prepare for the entrance exam.

“At the Wei City, master, you often worried that before you even began the revenge, the old people would die from disease and aging.”

“Yet since I have already waited for more than ten years, I believe that Heaven will definitely give me several dozens more days.”

.....

Revenge is a composite project, especially when you are only an insignificant person and your goal was to kill a high class person in the empire. The project would be complicated and huge to an unimaginable extent. Ning Que did not have the luck of an earl and also did not have the patience of an eunuch. He had to be extremely careful. (the earl and eunuch are references to people in history)

He stayed on forty-seventh street for days. He inquired if some interesting things happened recently in Chang An and he discovered that Zhang Yi Qi’s death, as expected, did not have much of an impact. The only thing it accomplished was triggering the Chang An residents’ countless comments and laughs. There appeared to be many different

versions of the thing that happened in the side door of the brothel but most of them connected the censor's death with the bad luck of his scary wife.

As Ning Que predicted, the madam in the censor's mansion was still trying to make this thing a big deal in the police office of Chang An, but the Red Sleeves reopened after closing for a day. It seems like, although the government did not completely conclude this incident, they basically thought the censor's death was not special.

Until the third day, Ning Que knew that he should go to the Red Sleeves again. Otherwise if they appeared to be so much different than before, the girls and the maid Little Grass would definitely feel strange.

This time, he decided to take Sang Sang with him. Sang Sang piled up her hair high and hid it inside a hat. She also wore the simple clothes that Ning Que was wearing before. She no longer needed any extra decorations, with her dark face and extremely common look, no matter who was looking from which perspective, she was just a common little servant.

"It's not raining today. Why would you bring that with you to grab others' attention." He pointed to the big black umbrella behind Sang Sang's back and said.

Sang Sang shook her head and insisted her opinion. Ning Que then stopped caring about her. He knew that she was worried about the impact of censor Zhang Yi Qi's death. After all, it was safer for them to bring the black umbrella.

They did not expect that right after they closed the door of their store, they were surrounded by a crowd.

The crowd was made up of strong men. In the sunny spring, they revealed their chest, showed their muscular pectoralis and two or three black chest hairs to declare their power and courage. Also, under the tree far away from here, there were two police officers looking indifferently at the crowd which indicated that their power and courage were permitted by the police.

Sang Sang looked cautiously. Her right hand subconsciously extended to her back and tightly grabbed the middle portion of the big black umbrella. Yet Ning Que was not nervous at all. He looked at the two policemen under the tree and noticed that they did not even have a handicap in their hands. He guessed the origin of this crowd of strong men.

The leader of the crowd was about thirty, unlike how Ning Que imagined, he didn't immediately come over, scold and shout at him and then order his subordinates to rush into the store and rob everything, instead he politely made a salute and using a deep voice, he said, "Are you the little boss? Several days ago I came here before and unfortunately you weren't here, so I couldn't talk about something to you."

Ning Que took an eye at Sang Sang. He was about to ask, but suddenly he remembered that she did mention it to him before, so he turned around and looked at the man and answered softly, "Hi, is there anything I can help you with?"

"I believe that little boss, by now you should know why there's only one

store opening on forty-seventh street.” That man said his terms directly, “I will use 200 silver coins to purchase your rent contract. You will go seek another place. If there’s any loss, you can tell me. If it’s proper, we are willing to pay, but we have one request of you, that is.....move out right now.”

These terms sounded really good, Ning Que looked at this crowd, thinking that Chang An was no doubt the most gentle place, even a dismantlement was generous.

..... ..

Chapter 47 The Bamboo was Empty and the Two Ends Were Loud

Ning Que looked at the man and said honestly, "I have to admit, your compensation is very generous."

The man laughed and answered, "I work for the government, so of course my actions are for the good. I'll tell you this young owner, "the government is not lacking in funding and I don't need to earn much from the transaction. If you are willing to move, then the price can still be changed. In the end, it will be good for you, for me and for everyone else."

To be honest, the price that the man gave was fair, or even more than fair. If Ning Que was willing to move out of the Old Brush House, not only would he not lose anything, he would actually earn a good amount of money. But he knew as well that his shop was a card in the man's hand. Although it wasn't a big card, when the man argues with the government, he could hold his ground. If it wasn't for this reason, the small card wouldn't be worth this much money.

He instinctively looked at Sang Sang and wanted to ask for her opinion. However, Sang Sang's face was still expressionless and it was hard to determine if she was for or against it. Suddenly, Ning Que remembered the landlord that had walked into the Old Brush House when it was opened for the first day and felt that there are some hidden meanings behind this.

The man looked at Ning Que and wrinkled his eyebrows, "Young owner, no matter yes or no, won't you make a decision?"

Ning Que got closer to the man and lowered his voice, "Brother, I am from a small village and I don't want to go against you and your purpose. I am just curious, if this trade goes unsuccessful, then what would you do?"

If this sentence was said by some rich and fat shop owner, then the man would probably find the owner aggravating and slap him on the spot. But Ning Que used his young age as his advantage and the man started to explain seriously, "We will probably dump garbage in front of your shop, and throw bricks at your windows at midnight. These actions are unavoidable. If we are truly angry, then we could sneak into your shop and destroy the well in your backyard. You know, young owner, we make a living from this business."

Hearing this answer, Ning Que was stunned. He said to himself quietly, "If there is a bright moon in the night sky of Tang Empire, then the moon shined upon the Tang and the past is same as present."

(Translator: The author was referencing an Tang Poem by the famous Tang Dynasty poet Li Bai. The meaning of the original poem is that when the people are looking at the never changing moon they would express their thoughts on the shortness of life and people should value the preciousness of time. However, Mao Ni changed the words and order of the poem slightly to remark that the business of the dismantler was the same as the past as the present. In addition, in the world of Jiang Ye there is no moon present in the night sky, thus Ning Que said "If there is a bright moon in the night sky of Tang Empire." Lastly, since Ning Que was originally from the present time and was warped to the world of Jiang Ye, he was commenting upon the similarities and the forceful actions of dismantlers from the present and past when a resident decides not to move. <——Do the you guys want explanations or rather leave them out?)

The men surrounding the Old Brush House were obviously gangsters who made a living from being dismantlers. Plus, they were actually working for the Chang An Government and the Department of Housing Project. It would be troublesome to disobey. Ning Que knew that although they were advising him nicely to move right now, if he stayed in his house, who knew how many bad things could go down. Although he wasn't scared to going against the gangsters, the important thing was that he had just killed a censorer and will join the entrance exam of The Academy. He didn't want any more things to happen and was interested in the offer presented to him.

Just this moment, a crowd's footstep could be heard from the other end of the Forty-Seventh Street. A sharp voice came along with the crowd and it was filled with hatred.

"Dumping garbage, throwing bricks and contamination wells? When did you imbeciles dare to do these things? Are you saying that you've have done such things before? If you have done these things, then how come your hands are still attached to your wrists?"

A group of men wearing blue shirt, blue pants, and blue shoes walked into the street from the other end. The person who spoke had thin eyebrows, thin eyes, a thin voice and a thin body. The blue shirt on his body was waving in the wind as if it was hang from a bamboo.

He walked to the entrance of the Old Brush House and bowed to Ning Que. Then he turned around and looked at the other men and mocked, "A group of gangsters who couldn't make a living in the southern part and want to force dismantle? You guys dare do these things I said previously in the Forty-Seventh Street? You are really not scared of

getting your legs chopped off!”

The man who previously discussed with Ning Que about the compensation showed a hint of fear, but after he saw the official guards behind him, straightened his back and smiled coldly, “Fourth Master Qi, we need to speak clearly about this. We have never done those things because they are shady. If this young owner is a smart man, then why would I need to do those things?”

Fourth Master Qi spit toward the foot of the man, “Yeah right, you, Poor Gu should shut your mouth! If Forty Seventh Street wasn’t the business of my brother, would you imbeciles act nicely?”

Poor Gu yelled, “What are you going to do? Firstly, I never used a knife. Secondly I never used a stick. I followed the rules and discussed business with this young owner. I used my money to buy his contact and this is still bad? If you believe that I violated any Tang Rules, then we can go to the court and sort this out!”

Fourth Master Qi spit again, turned toward Ning Que and bowed once more, “Young owner, your willingness to open your shop here is a sign of respect to my three thousand brothers. Don’t worry, you can stay here and do your business. If anyone dares to touch you, I, Fourth Master Qi will chop off their heads for you.

Seeing the two sides collide, Ning Que’s face was filled with nervousness but he was actually not disturbed. He observed the actions of the Chang An gangs with interest and then noticed that the middle aged man who rented the shop to him was clearly a big character in the capital. While he was being a spectator of a gang violence show and guessing when they would start fighting, he didn’t expect the problem to

move to him once again. He smiled and gestured, "Fourth Master Qi, the previous landlord dismissed three months of rent, and I'm truly grateful of it. But the price that Mr. Gu gave is fair as well."

Ning Que purposely didn't finish his thought so that the others could continue their argument. Poor Gu heard Ning Que's words and joy filled his face. He looked at Fourth Master Qi and laughed, "Fourth Master you heard him, the young owner spoke for himself."

Fourth Master scoffed and turned around to look at Ning Que, "How much money did he promise you?"

"Two hundred silver coins," Ning Que stuck out two fingers and thought for a moment and added a comment, "If my business was harmed, Mr. Gu is willing to compensate more."

Fourth Master Qi looked at Ning Que mockingly and suddenly pointed at the road beneath his feet and said seriously, "Two hundred silver coins? Is there still such a fair price in the entire Chang An? Yeah there actually is, only on Forty-Seventh Street! Why? Because my brother is kind enough to protect all of the shop owners of this street! The southern gangs have no way of forcefully dismantling and therefore had to give such a high price. But what's the result? Those bastard shop owners took the money and left!"

Poor Gu's face was filled with embarrassment. Speaking from truth, the business in the street continued for about half a year. After fighting for such long time, the backgrounds of the two sides were angry as well. They stopped caring about the benefit and wanted to occupy this street disregarding the cost. The government couldn't intervene and the southern gangsters couldn't cause the landlord trouble on this street

either. Therefore, they could only use money to get the land. Some shop owners ran after obtaining the money and some owners sold their land for a low price because they didn't want to start trouble with either side. Regardless of what happened, the southern gangsters earned some money without violence.

After hearing this and calculating silently, Fourth Master Qi noticed that the actions of the landlord didn't regard his own profit. If he really cared about the shop owners, then he was a kind person.

Fourth Master Qi looked at Ning Que coldly and was about to get angry, but suddenly he remembered his brother's words and pushed down his anger and yelled, "They will give you two hundred silver coins? We'll dismiss one year of your rent, and secure your safety without charge!"

Chapter 48: The injured police and the old Taoist beside the altar.

Gu Xiao Qiong was stunned, he looked at him and said, "Fourth Master, this is not cool. What kind of price raising is this?"

Fourth Master Qi yelled, "Go cool your mom! You guys are trying to take my brother's business and I should be cool with you?!"

Gu Xiao Qiong was being cursed out. He bit his teeth and spoke to Ning Que, "This is a one time deal! Five hundred silver coins! To be honest with you, I am giving all of the money I earned from the last two shops in this. I cannot give you any price higher."

Fourth Master Qi laughed coldly and mocked, "Look at you cheapskate. Is this how Iron Head Song teaches his subordinates? You do things without generosity. Let me show you how to give a price."

He turned to Ning Que and said proudly, "Young owner, if you are willing to continue opening your shop on this street, then as long as I, Fourth Master Qi, lives, then no one will take your rent pay....."

The last phrase "-ment" wasn't even out of his mouth yet and Ning Que waved his arm to stop him. Ning Que smiled warmly and asked, "Fourth Master, previously you said you will rent the shop to me for free for a year?"

Fourth Master Qi was stumped for a second and answered, "Yeah."

"Then it's a deal," Ning Que turned already and bowed to Gu Xiao Qiong and his crew. He smiled kindly and said, "I am really sorry, but I have decided to continue my business in this shop. Please return."

After hearing this, the crowd circled around the Old Brush House was stumped. The reason why they were stumped wasn't because of Ning Que's choice, but rather because he accepted the previous offer before Fourth Master Qi could make a better offer which would basically give him the entire shop for free.

Fourth Master Qi didn't respond for a long while but then, the expression on his face turned serious. He put his hands together and greeted properly. His voice was powerful, "Although you are young, your way of doing things is generous and respectful. Just because of your words, if you have any trouble later, just say my name. I won't promise anything much but you can walk all over the eastern district without problem."

Gu Xiao Qiong just stood there for a long time without knowing what to do. His confused eyes switched from Ning Que to Fourth Master Qi and then back. He thought back to his boss, Iron Head Song's yelling before he left, and thought back to how the boss of his boss slapped his boss, and then thought about the final date that the background of the boss of his boss gave. Instinctively, he turned his head around and looked at the two policemen under the tree.

Tonight gangs were gather around the Forty Seventh street. Although they were talking, it never evolved into a physical fight. The two policemen under the tree never interfered with anything which is already a fault on their part. Only until they see the seeking eyes of Gu Xiao Qiong did they cough and walked to the Old Brush House holding the swords on their waists.

Fourth Master Qi looked at the two policemen and remembered some sad event that happened in the past. His eyes turned cold but furious and he said to Ning Que with a chilling voice, "Young owner, did I tell you earlier that you can walk all over the eastern district?"

For some reason, Ning Que decided to choose this moment to tag into the conversation. He laughed and agreed while Fourth Master laughed coldly, "I'll show you today that I dare to say such a thing."

"Why are you guys gathering around here? You want to start some riot?" The policemen walked toward the crowd and yelled sharply.

"Yes." Fourth Master answered lightly and waved his hand, "I'm actually starting a riot, and I want this riot to be big. Brothers, go greet these two police officers nicely."

Just when he finished the sentence, the men wearing green shirts, green pants, and green boots all gathered around the two policemen. It was unknown who threw the first punch, but moments later punches were landing endlessly on the two men of the government of Chang An. Earlier, the two policemen were yelling and showing their identity while wanting to draw their swords, but they were kicked down by the crowd and started to bleed just moments later. Their arms wrapped around to protect their head as rolled around on the floor. They couldn't even yell anymore but rather, they were moaning painfully on the ground. Even the two swords that represented the authority were thrown out by the crowd.

Ning Que thought earlier that the gangs of Chang An had their own rules and attitude. Now looking at the two official swords that got thrown

out of the crowd, he then knew that the gangs of Chang An were real. They don't mess around when they are doing business, even if the people standing in their way are from the government.

He watched the messy fight outside of his shop surprisingly and saw the two bleeding policemen. He was so shocked that he couldn't even speak. Gu Xiao Qiong and the gangs from the southern district were also impressed by this action.

After stepping into the Forty Seventh Street, they never really fought against the power of the eastern district. Only now did they know their enemy was so arrogant!

"Alright, stop fighting." Fourth Master Qi, who was standing and watching this fight on the side coldly, spoke again. The greenly dressed men scattered around and he walked toward the two policemen and said chillingly, "If you dare to stab my brothers in the dark, don't blame me if I'm ruthless."

The younger policeman stared furiously at his face and said, "You dare to fight an official? Just wait to be decapitated. You should just kill me right now and make it a worthy deal."

Ning Que lamented; the people of Chang An sure are proud and brave. Even a small policeman dared to talk back in such a bad situation.

Fourth Master Qi squatted down and slapped his face lightly, "Don't use those words to scare me. We are all dogs raised by the powerful figures. You two are just dogs who wears one more jacket than I do. Of course, your jackets are fancy, so I wouldn't dare kill you. But let me ask you, if

dogs are biting dogs on the street, will those powerful figures care?"

After saying his sentences, Fourth Master Qi turned around and bowed to Ning Que. He then he led his group of men out of the street. Gu Xiao Qiong and his southern gang gathered around and discussed this matter. They then went up and carried the two wounded policemen out of the street. No one looked at Ning Que and his maid again because everyone knew, since Fourth Master Qi already sealed the deal, they could do nothing but embarrass themselves if they bring trouble to Ning Que before shutting down Fourth Master Qi.

The dispute on Forty Seventh Street ended just like that, there was no continuation. Just as Fourth Master Qi said, these kinds of dog-bite-dog events wouldn't enter the eyes of their owner. But Ning Que still had some confusion about this whole thing.

—————Although policemen are not exactly powerful, their uniform and swords represented the face of government, pride of the empire. Even if the boss behind Fourth Master Qi – that middle aged man who hid in the shop to avoid the rain was extremely powerful, it would still be violation of law to hit an official of the government. Especially since Fourth Master Qi never touched the gangs of southern district but hit the policemen of Chang An for no reason. This makes no sense.

Unless the two sides held a great grudge against each other.

Thinking about his prediction and thinking back to that event, his eyebrows wrinkled slightly, and then relaxed. His goal today was to visit the Red Sleeve Club and shop to release some pleasure from his first sweet revenge. The troublesome but must-be-resolved new grudge will be left to think about in the future.

There was a significant distance between the Forty Seventh Street to the Red Sleeve Club. Usually Ning Que always rode the two cent carriage to get across the city, but today Sang Sang was with him. This meant that they wouldn't get bored on the way and so, they chose to walk. These two never thought much about the previous clash of the two gangs because Ning Que was used to bloody and dangerous scenes while Sang Sang never put anything in her head unless it was extremely important. Their mood while shopping was actually pretty nice.

They visited the needlework shop, book store and shopping street. They bought a bowl of cheap lotus leaf rice and traveled across Phoenix Street quickly. Then they found a lively place where dozens of Chang An citizen were following the lead of an elder Taoist to bow and kowtow before an altar. Ning Que asked a random person who was also observing this scene and knew that the Southern Sect of the Way was trying to do some blessing ritual to move the spring rain of Chang An to some drier terrain in the north.

The elder Taoist beside the altar had gray long hair. His Taoist robe was waving with the wind. He seemed to actually be a spiritual being of some sort. The wooden sword in his hand started to vibrate and several talismans were shaking at the tip of his sword. Suddenly, a red mark appeared and a moment later the wooden sword flew into the sky and rushed down into the altar. The talismans were burned to ashes and they flew with the wind. They then mixed with the sand on the floor when they landed.

Chapter 49: The Distaste between Empire and the Way

The citizens who were kneeling before the altar were still praying, while the crowd around the altar were cheering for the Taoist. This scene was like an artist showing off their skill in the streets and tried something dangerous to capture the viewer's attention.

Just after the ritual of moving the rain finished, the Taoist's apprentices was ready to move the altar and items back in the church. But who knew at this moment the sky suddenly turned dark and rain started to fall down. Sang Sang opened the big black umbrella up and raised her head while looking at Ning Que proudly. The circling crowd which had no umbrella scattered quickly and hid under the roofs of nearby houses. They glanced at the apprenticed and pointed at them. Faintly their mocking and scoffing could be heard.

Ning Que looked at this scene and couldn't help but laugh. But suddenly he realized something and glanced once again at the old Taoist in the rain. His eyes were filled with shock rather than sympathy.

He believed his observations, the previous wooden sword and talisman were not magic tricks, then they could only be.....xiuxing techniques! From the knowledge that the elder Lu Qing Chen taught him, even if this old Taoist didn't enter the third stage of xiuxing, Questionless, he should have entered the second stage, Sensation, for a long time!

Besides Xi Ling, Chang An city had the most xiuxingists in the world. But he never thought that he could encounter a xiuxingist while shopping casually with Sang Sang. And this Taoist who was about to enter Questionless was still using these pathetic ways to perform.

It's funny how the Taoist tried to use this way to gather more believers, but their Way wasn't really helping them out. It's true, even the saints who entered Boundless and Blessed stage didn't have the ability to summon wind and rain. Speak less of a weak old Taoist.

Ning Que watched the closing doors of the church while wrinkling his eyebrows and thought of something.

The Great Sky Way was the only official religion in this world and was respected in every kingdom. No taxes were collected in the territory of churches and the officials of the religion was well respected and praised in the society. In kingdoms like Da He and Nan Ji, their kings need approval and blessing from the bishops of the Great Sky Way in order to ascend their thrones.

But earlier when seeing the mocking and scoffing from the citizens, it was clear that the status of Great Sky Way in Tang Empire couldn't compare to other kingdoms. Even though the bishop of the southern sect of Great Sky Way was appointed as the prime minister of Tang, but the entire world knew the relationship between the southern sect and the main branch wasn't close. The power of a pointing leaders of different churches in the Tang Empire was in the hand of the emperor, Xi Ling couldn't influence any decision.

It was even rumored that when Tang Empire was first established, the Great Sky Way was banned to spread its religion in the empire.

Speaking logically. as the single most powerful religion in the world having having billions of believers, the enormous Great Sky Way couldn't

endure such insult and oppression. Matter for fact, they didn't endure. Everyone believed that the Attack on Tang by Seventeen kingdoms was supported by Xi Ling Heaven (Headquarter of the Great Sky Way).

In the past, the alliance of seventeen kingdoms was formed and hundred millions of army were attacking the territory of Tang Empire. But they were crushed by the newly established Iron Riders of Tang Empire. Following their counter strike the Tang Empire rode out of their boundary and waged war against the world. Countless cities were crushed and after this massive warfare, the so called "alliance" was melted like snow. Three of the kingdoms were directly conquered by Tang Empire and became the three counties of He Bei Way. Those three counties were the counties that got taxed the heaviest by the first emperor of Tang.

The problem that troubled everyone was that in this Great War, Xi Ling Heaven never stepped in and react. The countless xiuxingists of the Great Sky Way never entered the battles. Perhaps due to this reason, after the war was over Tang Empire never directly attacked the Great Sky Way. Great Sky Way also gained the approval to spread their religion in the Tang Empire as well.

After this warfare, Tang Empire established its superiority over the world and became the single most powerful kingdom. The Great Sky Way still owned the most believers in the world. One was in world power while the other in religion. Both were distasteful of each other, but because they never had the confidence in taking each other down, they just acted as if they couldn't see each other. Gradually over time Tang and Great Sky Way lost their interest in attacking.

This kind of situation was kept for thousands of years, and it hasn't changed even now. Therefore Great Sky Way was still almighty everywhere else, but in Tang's territory even the tiniest church will be

taxed. Everywhere else the people were followers of Great Sky Way, in Tang territory if the southern sect of Great Sky Way wants to attract more followers they need to send xiuxingists out and do tricks for the citizens to watch.....

Walking beneath the big black umbrella and in the rain, Ning Que thought back to the previous scene and couldn't help but laugh while shaking his head, "To be honest, that old Taoist was a little pitiful. Perhaps our prime minister is the same in the palace."

Sang Sang used her right arm and shoulder to hold the black umbrella in place. In her left hand was a pancake that she bought from a small shop. She stop indistinctively, "Master, you seem to enjoy Chang An."

"A different place of earth raises a different kind of people, but the people could also change the taste of the earth." Ning Que smiled and answered, "Perhaps not so much liking Chang An, but I do like the people of Chang An."

Just when he was saying, he suddenly wrinkled his eyebrow and said, "Three four, seven.....eight."

Sang Sang was stumped a little and squeezed the pancake into her little mouth. Her left hand quickly rubbed a certain spot on his back. Ning Que wrinkled his eyebrow while picking up the heavy black umbrella in her hands. He corrected himself, "No, it's seven seven."

"I know."

The spring rain poured down on Chang An city. In the streets, between the buildings, and along the people wearing rain coats, a big black umbrella was traveling around like a dark lotus. Under the big black umbrella Sang Sang had pancake in one hand and scratched Ning Que's back with the other. The faces of the master and maid were filled with happiness and satisfaction.

Besides people who sell umbrella and rent carriages, no one else would like the spring of Chang An City, which was filled with rainy days. The brothel was no exception. Due to the incident that occurred a few days ago, the Red Sleeve Club was forced to shut down for one day, while some unfortunate rumors were spread in the city. Right now it seemed suitable to play the instruments and draw, due to the drizzle outside, but there was truly no business during the day.

Even the girl who had their own house couldn't resist but gathered in the front building. After greeting Madam Jian they all gathered in a room and chatted with each other to get by some time. This situation was suddenly changed after Ning Que and his maid entered the building and sudden the brothel was filled with laughter.

In the room of the topmost floor, a man around forty years ago saw this scene was the girls working for him. he couldn't help but wrinkled his eyebrows while rebuking deeply, "All of them really think they are noble ladies who have nothing to do. Meng San, ask Madam Jain.....remember to be polite.....who that youngster is. If he doesn't have a background just get him out of here. The girls that I used money employing are not for him to be chatting with."

"I advise you to not mess with that youngster, because.....he's my last tenant."

Around the table a middle aged man looked at him and smiled, his sword that was on his waist was now placed beside him. This man was the owner of all shops in the Forty Seventh Street.

Chapter 50: A conversation that changed the history of Chang An

Ning Que didn't realize that the owner of Red Sleeve Club was staring at him coldly on the top floor. He didn't know that this owner was angry because the girls were chatting with him instead of focusing on the business. Ning Que sat causally next to Lady Shui Zhu Er, chatting with everyone while also collecting information about Zhang Yi Qi's death without people noticing.

"I like your smile, your dimples are so cute," Shui Zhu Er laughed and winked at him, "But all things aside, since you are applying for the Academy you need to study hard. Or else if you failed to enter, then everyone would think us girls were the reason for your failure. How are you going to compensate such negative rumors?"

"Don't pull us in, Ning Que comes everyday and only chat with you, what does this has to do with us?" A girl joked.

Although Shui Zu Er's words seem to be a joke, but she actually cared about Ning Que's future performance in the entrance exam. Ning Que's heart was filled with warmth and replied casually. He was just saying rubbish like he was done with his work and they don't need to worry about his grades. Sang Sang was aside with her head down eating seeds and talking with the maid, Xiao Cao. She thought to herself, "Master, your words are not rubbish but rather lies. There are six topics in the entrance exam of the Academy, and I reminded you everyday to study. In the end, do you even know how many topics there are?"

Although for her appearance Sang Sang didn't need any make-up for camouflage to act as a servant, but the keen eyes of the girls in brothel

already knew she was a girl. Xiao Cao was chatting with her on the side and thought to herself with sympathy, "Ning Que definitely disliked Sang Sang because she's not pretty, that's why he visits the brothel everyday shamelessly."

In the room on the top floor, the middle aged man wearing the green advanced next to the owner of the Red Sleeve Club and looked down into the building. He saw the youngster chatting with the girls around him and couldn't help but smiled. His sharp and steady eyes were brightened.

"If this youngster is truly the last tenant of Forty Seventh Street, then there is no reason for me to allow him to stay." That man smiled, "If I get him out of there, all of the rental approval will be in my hand. Then I can transfer those approval to the government, and what other reasons can you use to reject the requisition of Forty Seventh Street from the Chang An government?"

"All of the shop owners of Forty Seventh Street were once gone when you interrupted, but have you ever see me lower my head?" The middle aged man in green shirt smiled, "Besides..... you can't get this youngster out of there."

"I can't?" The man stared into his eyes quietly and suddenly laughed, "Sure, who dare to act unwisely in front of Lao Chao of Chun Feng Pavilion?"

The middle aged man smiled but didn't replied. He turned around and sat back into his chair.

Earlier in the day he has received messages from his fourth brother (In

this case, Fourth Master Qi). He knew what happened today in the Forty Seventh Street. A young foreign student was not afraid at all between two gangs' heated situation and actually gained benefit from it. Ning Que basically robbed a whole year worth of rent from him, but that youngster didn't try to raise the price any higher. Ning Que's way of doing things are mature and knew when to stop, in another words, he's very generous.

The first day Old Brush House was opened, he went to Forty Seventh Street not for the purpose of avoiding the rain, but he was rather interested which idiot was brave enough to rent his shop. But after the observation, he then knew that this youngster may not know the events that was happening between the Chang An's gangs, but he's not an idiot.

There isn't a single idiot in this word that could write with such delicate penmanship. There is no idiot that has such thick skin on his palm that hold swords. Thinking back to the firm and steady writings hanging on the walls of Old Brush House, he felt a hint of murderous scent. Relating this back to Forth Qi's description to today's event, the middle aged man was suspicious that perhaps the youngster killed people.....no, he was suspicious that perhaps the youngster killed a lot of people.

Only fifteen or sixteen years old, the youngster has already killed a lot of people. Even to the middle age man, who constantly walked in the darkness with blood on his boots, it wasn't really a believable fact. For a youngster like him, if he's not willing to move himself, then who is able to force him to?

"Chao, in the very least I'm representing the prince mansion today, can't you be a little bit more respectful?"

The middle aged man raised his head and noticed that his mind wasn't

concentrating because he was thinking about that youngster. He couldn't help but smiled apologizing. The prince mansion didn't affect him one bit.

The man who was talking with him is named Cui De Lu. Although it was a very common name, but he was definitely not an ordinary person. The man who could take care of the best brothel in Chan An couldn't be ordinary. Most of the Chang An citizens thought this brothel's background was a powerful official, but only figures like the middle aged man knew, Cui De Lu relied on the prime stepward of prince mansion. Some people even believe that this brothel was the business of the prince.

"Red Sleeve Club is in troubles recently, I never thought you have the time to talk about these things."

Cui De Lu's face got colder, "The prince doesn't want Forty Seventh Street, you know this. It's only because the military department couldn't interact with this kind of business, therefore they asked us to help them. Who knew you are so stubborn and wouldn't let go of that space, which irritated the big figures in the military. Now this thing became huge, a few days ago the Chang An government came and you pushed them back, now even the Yu Lin military was sent out....."

Hearing Yu Lin Military, the middle aged man's eyebrow raised, as if the word hurt him so.

Seeing his expression, Cui De Lu switched his topic and laughed, "Of course you should know, the prince mansion is helping the two departments to solve their problem. In the end there would be benefit for us. Even the prime stepward said, the prince admired you. Once after he was drunk he mentioned your name and said you do things with rules in

Chang An and knew your place.”

The middle aged man was still silent, but that hint of darkness grew in his eyes.

Cui De Lu continued seriously, “You also know that there was a censor who died in my building. This thing is pretty troublesome. That idiot died himself but his family raised the trouble all the way to the government of Chang An. The prince was related to that censorer and therefore couldn’t speak in a situation like this, therefore I could only solve this problem myself. If you could help me out in a situation like this, then I will never interrupt the business in Forty Seventh Street ever again.

Although the man was just a owner of a brothel, although he kept saying himself and himself only, but the middle aged man knew very clearly that he was representing the attitude of the prince. What he said was the voice of the prince. He thought for a moment and smiled, “Even if the prince was related to the censorer, but it should be very easy to calm the situation down. How would he need gangs to help him out?”

Cui De Lu’s face got gloomier, “Do you not understand or are you pretending not to? If it’s the previous one, then there is no more Chao of Chun Feng Pavilion in my eyes, because you are an idiot. If it’s the latter on, then there is no more Chao of Chun Feng Pavilion in my eyes, because you are too smart but doesn’t know when to appreciate favors.”

The middle aged man answered calmly, “The business of Forty Seventh Street is no trouble. It’s not a trouble to the prince, nor a trouble to me, Chun Feng Pavilion’s Chao. If a department of the government really needed it, I will give it to them without questions. But.....you shouldn’t pressure me because of this.”

"The rule of us, Chun Feng Pavilion, is to not interact with the power struggles in the government. No matter the prince, the military, or the government, if they are related to power struggle, then I will walk as far away from them as possible. The more you pressure me the more I will do so."

"Chun Feng Pavilion's Chao is the head of the biggest gang in Chang An. You have thousands of people under you to feed. The government gave you the business of transporting goods, and now you want to walk away? Do you think you could walk away? Where do you want to go? Where could the three thousand brothers under you go? The jail of Department of Justice or the military prisoners in the boundaries?"

Cui De Lu stared at him ghastly, "In the previous years the Court was calm and it was possible of protecting yourself. But now the Fourth Princess has returned and she wanted to make her brother the crowned prince. Yet the queen is still alive, and the queen also has a son! of course these royal business has nothing to do with you, but if you don't state your opinion clearly right now, then.....both sides wouldn't accept you!"

"Is it a must to find an owner as a dog?" The middle aged man sigh deeply and asked, "So you are representing the prince to accept me?"

"Yes. Now everyone in Chang An who's capable are pressuring you. Why? because you are a dog without an owner. In this kind of situation if you are willing to take refuge under any side, no matter the military or others, if you got an owner, then people would think twice before bothering you because of your background.

"Can I ask a question?" The middle aged man suddenly smiled and asked.

"Sure."

"Between the queen and forth princess, who would the prince support?"

Cui De Lu said without a trace of hesitation, "He wouldn't support any side. The prince is forever loyal to the emperor. Whoever the emperor says is right, the prince will support whoever."

The middle aged man heard this answer and was silent for a long time. Then he raised his head slowly and smiled, "I'm sorry. As a man of Tang, I'm not used to being a dog."

Cui De Lu was stumped and he pressured his irritation down and advised, "Everyone will be a dog in some point of their lives, some people couldn't even be a dog if they wanted to."

The middle aged man stood up and wrapped his sword on his waist and gestured carefreely, "Owner Cui, you are not a suitable adviser, because you don't know my personality."

The face of Cui De Lu got uglier, he stood up and spoke deeply, "Are you worrying that your decision wouldn't convince your underlings? don't worry, the prince said that if you are willing to join his side, even just symbolically, he will make the military compensate and give you two heads. Can't you, as the leader of them, convince your three thousand brothers then?"

Since the conversation has advanced to this point, he couldn't care about using the prime stepward as a cover up anyone, he directly mentioned the prince in his words. But the middle aged man seemed to not care and directly walked out of the door. No one noticed that when Cui De Lu said, "As the leader," the middle aged man smiled mysteriously.

"Just you wait, Chao." Cui De Lu stared at his back head ghastly, "It seemed that you and your brothers are living too well in Chang An and forgot how to spell the word 'respect'. But I must remind you, these people are the most powerful figures. It's not a world that a cockroach like you who dwells in the sewers can understand."

The middle aged man gradually slowed down, but he didn't turn back his head.

Translation changes to:

<https://mechamushroomtranslations.wordpress.com/jiang-ye-informationindex/>

Chapter 51: As Long As Heaven Will Tolerate Me, I Can Still Live

Cui DeLu saw this middle-aged man's back and coldly said, "I know what you're relying on. Aren't you just constantly relying on Chang Three or Qi Four, Wu Five, Fei Six, Chen Seven – these people? I know you can fight, and these brothers can very much fight, but don't you forget, Chang Three and Fei Six are officers in the Yu Lin Army, Liu Five is the Brave Riders Army leader, Chen Seven is further an old man retired from the Imperial Guard. Great men can easily raise one finger, and force you into Hell's deepest abyss forever unable to stand again."

This middle-aged man suddenly turned around, frowning and gazing at him with two eyes.

"These years your most reliable, best fighting brothers have died in no few numbers, besides that Qi Four useless thing, you can only rely on a few guys, you truly don't understand the power of nobles. For them, with one word, one written paper, they could easily trap your bit of fighting strength in the barracks. In this city of Chang An, for several years you've suppressed demons and monsters, once they know this news, surely they would very happily come out and ruthlessly take a bite?"

The middle-aged man was silent for a moment, and his facial expression gradually became calm, and he continued walking towards the door out.

Cui DeLu behind him coldly laughed and said, "Spring winds blow towards Lao Chao.....your hands are stretched too far, to have actually already stretched to the Imperial Court.....now everywhere you look are enemies. I'd like to see who can still tolerate you!"

The middle-aged man's right hand was set on the room's door. After some silence he said, "As long as heaven can tolerate me, I can still live."

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Red sleeves invited this conversation to the top floor. In a sense, determining Chang An City's underworld was the historical natural course – when those people loftily residing in the Imperial Court and above, suddenly were interested in the weeds of the JiangHu. No matter how vigorous those weeds' vitality was, or how strong their desire to live was, it would inevitably be like a grassland after a wildfire, only leaving scorched black stems and roots surviving inside of the soil; never again able to repeat the past prosperity.

This was the taste of power.

Censor Zhang YiQi's wife in her whole life was in fact very used to this kind of flavor, so after Zhang YiQi suddenly died, she completely had no way of accepting this matter. Bringing a whole gang with her to the brothel to cause trouble, the wife's army took their lord's body back home and cried for two days, then began rushing between the DaLi Temple and taking charge of the law and order of the capital city Chang An mansion. Only it was a pity this time it was up to her to sniff this bit of taste of power. This flavor then began tasting bad.

"How could my lord be so short-lived? He said to me once that 27 years ago he had his fortune told by a big state master, saying he would certainly would live beyond 100 years. From my view, my lord definitely was schemed to death by that building's fox spirits! Mr. Magistrate of the capitol, you must support me. If you dare cover for that building, I will go to the Prince's Mansion to beg his majesty to preside fairly for my lord!

Sitting at the table, that official appeared to be about 40 or so, with triangular eyes and a red bumpy nose. Under his jaw hung a sparse, net-like beard. His appearance was simply inelegant. For the Great Tang bureaucracy that paid particular attention to good looks, that this person hadn't been dispatched to lesser various regions' prefectures, and instead remained at Chang An's seat of government was simply an unusual figure.

The official looked at the skinny woman standing at the hall below making him get an unceasing headache. Luckily the Great Tang officials were very clear about the legendary existence of the state masters, and he carefully calculated before he understood. Twenty seven years ago the state master was only a boy of the Great Sky Way Southern Gate's Burning Fire Way, still not able to meet today's Emperor and thus rise. At the time he told Zhang YiQi's fortune, perhaps it was just a means to scam money mostly. Thinking of these things, he couldn't help but to cough twice and then imposingly said:

"Ahem.....madam please don't mourn too much. First of all you must understand, I ShangGuan YangYu, as an official of the Judicial Army of Chang An's government, am not a big magistrate of the capitol. Secondly, the Imperial Censor's remains have already gone through a detailed post-mortem examination. Indeed it was because the carriage unexpectedly crushed him, and his brain received a heavy blow that killed him. It simply isn't murder.

Imperial Censor Zhang YiQi died at the side door of the brothel. This matter was buzzing noisily in Chang An, but it was mostly mocking ridicule. And further, within government, no one connected this issue together with some kind of assassination. In order to divert that gang from using the poor censor as a reason to create a ruckus, two days ago

Chang An's government had already determined that the case was an accident.

But no one had thought that the Imperial Censor's wife would unexpectedly directly complain to DaLi Temple. The Imperial Censor's job is to offend officials, and his popularity naturally couldn't be too good. Even though Zhang YiQi was already dead, but his supporter his majesty, the Prince was still present. So, no one would throw stones down a well and splash dirty sewage on the situation, but also no one wanted to interfere too much. Consequently DaLi Temple, without the slightest politeness once again directly pushed back the Censor's wife to the Chang An seat of government.

Before when the capitol's administrator heard the drums beating, once he heard it was that fierce, bad-to-provoke Censor's wife, he slipped out of a side door to the back residence, and then told a servant that his body wasn't feeling too well and needed recuperation.

ShangGuan YangYu as an officer in Chang An's Judicial Army was responsible for criminal investigations cases, but couldn't find an excuse to slip away. In another official's eyes, the Censor's wife was a violent woman who wasn't good to provoke. But in his eyes, all officials' wives were paper tigers. As long as he seized a hold of the thing that they feared, he could scare them as he pleased. And so he could settle them, and also he could perhaps fish up some benefits from there.

At this time he still didn't forget to fish up some benefits. It goes to show this Judicial Army's greed, and this also needed to mention his background origins. ShangGuan YangYu's ancestral home was South Jin. His ancestor moved to Chang An five generations ago and settled here. The first generation lived impoverished in East City, and didn't have one promising son. If they weren't gambling addicts, they were lecherous. A

whole five generations could accrue no more than two leaky roof homes and tens of taels of silver. Directly until this generation of ShangGuan Yang Yu, only he had passed the official's exam. Then, from the lowest level of prison guard he boiled up, up until now when they finally had a genuine official.

When he joined the Judicial Army, ShangGuan YangYu no longer appeared like that low key, cautious manner from past years. His fear of poverty and crazy pursuit of money made him begin the road to taking bribes. The Chang An government was closely watched up and down by the Imperial Court, and with the poor that also incurred taxes, wanting to accept bribes was naturally not possible. However he could corrupt the law.

In Imperial Censor Zhang YiQi's case, he didn't want to wrongly accuse that brothel, but wanted to see if he could squeeze a bit of silver from that dead person's wife. He squinted his eyes, sizing up this shriveled Censor's wife. Not waiting for the other side to angrily refute, he waved, indicating for the other side to come closer. In a low voice he said, "Lady, the witness was your own family's accompanying escort. The evidence is still piled up in the back of the government office. On the body of the Imperial Censor there was also the smell of cosmetics, and that day you brought that gang of female servants carrying sticks and charging over, half of Chang An city's people all saw it. What do you think....it wasn't because the Censor was afraid that you wanted to go to the brothel to catch him having sex. Thus panicking and fleeing without minding his path, he crashed his head to death on his own carriage? Who would believe this?"

The Censor's wife suddenly changed color. Just when she was about to harshly scold him, ShangGuan YangYu smiled, his triangular eyes squinting into little four-sided copper coins. Continuing in a low voice he

said, "Actually I as an officer also understand. The Censor died too bizarrely and too stupidly, also.....this isn't nice to hear, you must make a ruckus. Then you can appear that your mind has a clear conscience, and also avoid other people saying you forced your own family's Lord to death. Further, if you really make enough racket, would that business still be unwilling to pay you a big stack of silver coins? Ai, this person has died and gone to the underworld and can't take care of the living. The Imperial Court sent that bit of pension and lost salary, but what is it enough to use for? To be able to get a stack of silver is naturally the best."

The Censor's wife's shriveled face had a very unnatural expression. Very clearly had ShangGuan YangYu spoken right on her thoughts. Slowly speaking after a while, suddenly full of expectations looking at him, she said in a low voice, "If this matter succeeds, I'll split with you.....two shares."

To dare to directly use Tang law to do business in the courtroom – if this matter was known to Imperial Censor Tai or the Imperial Palace, whether it was ShangGuang YangYu or this imperial censor's wife, probably all of them would be unable to escape and die. But today, all of the government offices in Chang An feared the imperial censor's wife making a scene and avoided her. Beyond the courtroom was actually formidable tranquility; she also wasn't worried someone would hear.

However, beyond the imperial censor's wife's expectations, ShangGuang YangYu's face suddenly sank, with a clap of the gavel in his hands, he shouted sternly, "A very brazen woman – it's because your husband was an imperial censor that I offered you three shares. To actually want to find the road to death!"

One shout immediately scared the censor's wife stupid. ShangGuang YangYu's face was like it came out of a painting, then rapidly changed

again to amiable. Earnestly he said, "I as an official denounce you to save you. Do you know who the supporter of that business is? You actually want to blackmail silver from there? You truly have great guts."

The censor's wife leaned on the courtroom table, and trembling she said, "This.....this.....again I request more advice from you."

ShangGuan YangYu naturally couldn't say that Chang An mansion possessed several shares at that business. Feigning mysteriousness and reaching out, pointing to the sky, in a low voice he said, "That is the Queen Mother's business."

"Ah?" As the censor's wife heard the words 'Queen Mother', it immediately scared her panicking – so much that even her knees felt a bit weak. With a trembling voice she said, "How could this be good? How could this be good?"

"If you want to insist on going and making a fuss, I can't guarantee that the deceased censor's reputation can protect you. After all someone saw him run out from the brothel, and at the time he was drunk."

ShangGuan Yang Yu gazed at her sternly and said, "The censor was visiting a prostitute. If the Imperial Palace knew, even if he died, they would want him removed from his official position, eliminating the promised lost salary. By then truly all of your efforts would be in vain."

The censor's wife fearfully asked, "Then.....then.....what should I do? If I don't do it, would it succeed?"

“The problem is that this matter has already caused trouble. However if you can settle with the master of that building, and request to not have this matter passed to the Palace, especially not that one’s ears, perhaps this matter can still be done.”

“Then let’s do it!” The censor’s wife was already out of ideas, with her shriveled face full of disappointment and nervousness, she asked, “How do you think this matter should be settled?”

ShangGuan YangYu smiled, knowing that right away a stack of silver coins was coming in, he couldn’t help but to feel every pore on his body relax and open. The shriveled woman’s face before him was pleasing to the eye not just a little bit. In his heart he proudly thought, how could consuming a man be as simple as consuming a woman? How could consuming a living person be as easily refreshing as consuming a dead person?

He was born impoverished so much that it could be said to be the lowest of the low. His ancestors didn’t have any bequeathment, no backing behind him, and he was born with an ugly face. Once something to eat like plaintiff or defendant came he had greed like a locust, and boot-licked as thick-skinned as a wild boar. His moral character was lacking without any point of appreciability. As long as Lord Hao Tian didn’t stop him, he would then continue this kind of stubbornly resolute lowly survival, so-called as long as heaven will tolerate me, I can still live.

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Continuous spring rain fell again for two days, the business facing 47th street was still just as deserted.

Ning Que didn't know that the Chang An government had someone called ShangGuan YangYu of the Judicial Army, that because he was greedy to his bones, after he substituted for him and resolved the little problem of the assassination of censor Zhang YiQi. At the moment he was carrying a small hot bowl of noodles, hoping that the rainy season wouldn't stop washing the limestone tiles. Thinking about the not too distant entrance exam, and thinking of the expensive tuition and housing, his mood was a bit depressed. Feeling a bit cold, he subconsciously used his left hand to tighten his collar.

Although that mysterious-background landlord dismissed a whole year's rent, a careful calculation equaled 320 taels of silver from thin air, but this silver wasn't at all existing silver, just something on paper. If that landlord truly couldn't handle the authorities' pressure, then even without rent, perhaps the Old Brush House wouldn't be able to keep operating.

Thinking of this, he couldn't help but to again have a sighing breath. Turning his head he used chopsticks pointed to raise the noodles within the bowl. He poked the delicious and delicately chopped onion to play with it, entirely without the appetite to eat. These two days, he completely didn't even have the inclination to write characters, much less eating this bowl for several years. With eyes closed and not even a smelling, he could still guess rightly that there were four peppercorns, and 30 little bits of green onions in the noodle soup.

Outside the shop, more and more rain fell. Loud sounds of gurgling water lashed the surface of the land, splashing foam flying in all directions and turned into mist. Visibility more and more worsened. The outer wall of the Ministry of Transportation's storage room couldn't even be seen clearly. Ning Que carried the noodle bowl and went to the doorstep. Squatting down, he continued to watch the rain, then lowered his head

and started eating noodles.

Suddenly he lifted his head, gazing at the right-side direction.

A middle-aged man carrying an oil-paper umbrella emerged presently outside the Old Brush Shop door. Wild rain soaked more than half of that blue garment. The gap above the sword sheath was also full of water beads – this was exactly the landlord of that place that exempted Ning Que from a year's rent.

The front layer of the chest part was a bit darker, and seemed a bit miserable, but amazingly, this middle-aged man didn't feel the slightest bit miserable. Supporting his oil paper umbrella calmly standing at the doorway, he concentrated in front without the slightest distraction from the rain. His expression was calm and tranquil, just like he was looking at a street packed with peach blossoms in sunshine.

Ning Que looked up towards him for a moment. He didn't speak, continuing to keep his head low to eat noodles.

After a long period of silence, the middle-aged man suddenly lowered his head towards him. Smiling he said, "Noodles are very fragrant."

Ning Que squatted down on the ground answered saying, "I've eaten this too many times. Even more tasty noodles would still be like this."

"I haven't eaten it before."

"Although you excused one year of my rent, but I don't plan to invite

you to eat.”

“I like the calligraphy that you wrote.”

The middle-aged man changed the topic strangely fast – just like the heavy falling rain in front of them, unable to seep through the umbrella and then rolling off the surface. From this bit, it could be felt that this person ordinarily was used to issuing orders, and didn’t allow his subordinates to question his commands.

“I’m also very fond of it.”

“Very well written.”

“I know my calligraphy is very good.”

The middle-aged male smiled, saying, “In the calligraphy..... killing intent is very full. I have very rarely seen someone with such unimpeded killing intent.

Ning Que bowed his head in silence. He looked at his hands clasped on the sides of the bowl asking, “Tonight you want to go kill people?”

The middle-aged man lamentingly answered saying, “Yes. Heaven will tolerate me; people won’t tolerate me. Then I can only kill people.”

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Chapter 52: Spring Wind Pavilion, Old Chao Xiaoshu

Ning Que turned his face towards him asking, "If you want to kill people, then just go kill people. What are you poking around my shop's doorway for?"

The middle-aged man replied, "I'm waiting for the rain to stop, and also waiting for several people."

"When waiting for the rain to stop, often it doesn't. When waiting for the time when people come, often they won't come." Ning Que advised with good intentions.

"If people don't come, there's certainly a reason." The middle-aged man smiled saying, "However can us two chat a few relatively serious words, and not like those resembling ascetic monks' exploration tests?"

"This attitude is correct. I also don't like to exhaust myself wandering around cloudy mountains." Ning Que smiled and replied, "But I don't like to squat on the ground and chat with someone standing up, because there's a difference in height."

"You can stand up."

"Why isn't it you that is squatting down?"

The middle-aged man smiled, he didn't in the least bit hesitate to directly squat down. His dripping wet blue shirt moved downwards to

cover up Old Brush House's door sill. Then he looked to see that Ning Que had a young and rough, serious face and said, "Right now I'm very much struggling."

Ning Que lowered his head to eat noodles, waiting for the rest.

"A lot of big figures want me to declare my position, but right now my situation is that I cannot declare my position, so right now I'm in the process of being besieged. My brothers and I do things very cleanly. If authorities want to use Tang law, I'll be most inconvenienced. So they decided to directly eliminate me tonight. Taking advantage of tonight's rainy scene, enemies from South City and West City are already surging over here."

"Are you waiting for those people?"

"I had a brother that died a few days ago. The majority of the remaining brothers are in official jobs. Those big figures very easily use official business to hold them in their barracks and inside of their government offices, so tonight I have very few people."

The night rain still continued and seemed to have trended towards becoming more heavy. The people the middle-aged man waited for also seemed like they didn't arrive, but he apparently didn't care, just calmly and mildly speaking about his own current circumstances that he was confronted with, without concealing anything. Afterwards he looked at Ning Que the one beside him. Smiling he said, "But all of these are not problems. Tonight my problem lies in that at my side I need a person, but I can't find that person."

Ning Que glanced at the sword that he wore on the side of his waist, guessing that the sword inside should be very small. He asked, "What kind of person do you need at your side?"

"Fast enough, ruthless enough, valiant enough – when killing people they can't blink an eye, and can't let anything fall on my body."

"That doesn't include rainwater?"

"Naturally no."

"Then this one request isn't very high."

Ning Que scratched his somewhat wet hair, asking, "Why is it me?"

The middle-aged man's gaze fell on the bowl held by his right hand saying, "I inquired about some things. Although Shu Bi Lake's Lumberjack is inside Chang An and has no reputation, but I'm very clear what the young, expert horse thief killer can do."

Ning Que was silent for a moment. Afterwards he smiled, and said, "Why would I want to go with you? What are the benefits?"

The middle-aged man very much appreciated the youngster's directness. Stretching his finger out and flicking rain water on the oil paper umbrella, he said with a smile, "All of ChangAn City doesn't have a single person that knows my cards. Tonight if I win, that card can be played. At that time you'll know, I truly have very thick legs, very worthy for you to hang onto."

"Since tonight is so dangerous, why don't you use those cards first?"

"Because the cards aren't a deck of cards – it is a person. I am unable to command him, and on the contrary he can command me. He needs me to win tonight's battle, because he wants to see if the opposing side has any hidden cards in their hands."

"Alright. I actually detest this style of dialogue a bit. I only want to say this leg of yours is perhaps very thick, but to me isn't very attractive. Since you know about the distant Shi Bi Lake, then you definitely must know I once had a chance to hang onto a seemingly very slender leg, but in fact was one of the Great Tang's thickest legs – but I didn't go and hang on."

Of course the one Ning Que spoke of was the Great Tang's Fourth Princess Li Yu. With those words he once again was silent, placing the noodle bowl in his hands on the wet floor, with the middle-aged man squatting shoulder to shoulder watching the rain. In this moment, he suddenly thought of some scene in some story he really liked. Thinking of the conversation with Little Black in the little restaurant, he finally made a decision. (Note author put it like this, it is unrelated to the story but is at the bottom)

After a moment of silence, the middle aged man said, "Perhaps..... you're used to direct offers?"

Ning Que stretched out his hand in the irritating rain and slapped it, and neatly and orderly said, "520 coins of silver."

The middle-aged man scrunched his brow and suggested, "Too little.

Going to add a little more?"

Beside the calligraphy shop door sill on a rainy night, the scene of two people haggling was indeed a bit strange. The employer unexpectedly thought that the money was too little.

Ning Que turned his head looking at him and asked, "How many people do you estimate I have to kill tonight?"

The middle-aged man thought for a bit before he said, "At least 5."

Ning Que replied, "In the grasslands, killing five horse thieves might not even get me 52 coins, so relax. For 500 coins, I definitely could stake my life on it."

"I don't need you to stake your life." The middle-aged man smiled, looking at him he said, "If it comes to a time where you need to stake your life, you can leave first."

Ning Que shook his head and said, "That's not the way I do things. 'Comradery is stronger than gold' is a very idiotic phrase, but since I'm doing a business, of course I need to respect basic trade ethics."

The middle-aged man smiled and extended his hand. "Deal."

Ning Que stretched out his hand and gently shook once and let go, saying, "My surname is Ning, the 'Ning' from AnNing (peaceful). Ning Que."

"My surname is Chao, the 'Chao' from Great Tang Chao (Dynasty), Chao XiaoShu."

"Such an arrogant surname, such a gentle name."

"People of ChangAn all call me Spring Wind Pavilion's Old Chao. You can call me brother Chao."

"Chao XiaoShu sounds a little better....I say XiaoShu, are you the leader of the Fish Dragon Gang?"

"You can call me Old Chao.....also, I have never admitted that I was Fish Dragon Gang's leader. I just gathered up a group of brothers, and did a few things that were inconvenient for the Imperial Court, that's all."

Ning Que finally confirmed his identity. Smiling and patting his shoulder he said, "ChangAn's number one gang's leader is still so modest. XiaoShu, with that it seems too fake."

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Pulling out an ordinary styled blade from a pile of firewood, searching for a yellow poplar hardwood bow and a quiver, picking up a big black umbrella wrapped in layers of worn cloth from a crude blue ceramic pot, then fastening everything on his back, he continued to grope around the bottom of a chest for quite a while. He felt out a black mask that who knows how long since it was last washed.

Carefully putting on a tight-fitting flexible armor, on the outside he wore a tight-pressuring short-sleeved robe. He parted his hair and fastened the full moon style commonly seen among the men of the country. Using the black mask to cover half his face, Ning Que carefully looked it over for a while in front of a bronze mirror. Confirming that there were no gaps, he went out to beyond the small kitchen and stuck his head inside and said, "I'm leaving."

Sang Sang was tidying the kitchen stove, and washing pots, bowls, and brushes. Her face had no emotion whatsoever. Her willow thin, slender eyes had a vaguely childish irritation, and without knowing why, today the little maid was very much done with the motion of putting away bowls and cleaning brushes big time. From time to time the muffled sound of slamming could be heard, and she rubbed a pot with force like she wanted to rub right through the black pot's bottom.

Ning Que slightly paused, then he understood a bit. Gently explaining he said, "Being able to earn some silver is always good, and it looks to me like that guy should have quite the backing. Giving the other side a favor is something I can use in the future."

With a bang, Sang Sang heavily threw the rag on top of the stove. Carrying a heavy metal wok, she went by herself and poured the dirty water with a twist of the little maid's waist – unexpectedly like she didn't see him, and hadn't heard his explanation.

Ning Que rubbed his brow. After a bit of silence he said, "Little Black that idiot carelessly left one word and then let out a fart. Even if I make excuses I have no way of going to the afterlife to look for him, then tonight can be considered paying him back in his place."

After saying this, he no longer concerned himself with little Sang Sang's little sulking. After going directly out of the back residence, he went to the front of the shop.

Spring Wind Pavilion's Old Chao, as the leader of ChangAn's number one gang, the Fish Dragon Gang, drifted in the JiangHu for years. Who knows how many exceptional strange types he had seen, and he knew that the Old Brush House's young boss definitely was one among exceptional people. Being mentally prepared for a while, but now seeing Ning Que with this outfit, he still couldn't help but to feel a bit of surprise. He looked at that mysterious rag-wrapped stick thing on Ning Que's back, and with a slightly wry smile said, "Looking at your outfit it doesn't look like you're going to kill people. Instead it's like a rascal that owes a gambling debt about to flee the same night. Perhaps you plan to take all of the things in your home and put it on your back?"

"I only have a blade on my back. You happy with it?"

Ning Que walked to his side, taking a glimpse of the wind and rain on Forty Lane. Noting that the ends of the alley didn't have a trace of anyone, he couldn't help but frown and say, "I hope that there are no traitors among your brothers. I don't hope to follow your winds to the scene of killing people and tomorrow turn into a wanted poster of the ChangAn government."

Spring Wind Pavilion* Old Chao lowered his head and glanced at this black mask that covered more than half of this youngster's face, and with a smile he said, "In truth you don't need this kind of precaution. If after tonight you and I are still alive, then in the future as long as you don't violate Tang law and commit crimes, in the entire Tang Dynasty that this Chang An City sits on, you wouldn't have anyone that dares to come looking for you for trouble."

Hearing these words, Ning Que thought, who said that ChangAn's number one gang didn't have backing, but he still didn't have the thought of taking off his mask and killing people clear as day. A clear young voice separated by a black mask sounded out. "I'm used to a low profile."

Spring Wind Pavilion Old Chao smiled, and didn't again comfort him of anything.

The peace of a spring night had long been disrupted by the sound of rain. At the moment, there were many sounds of footsteps. Ning Que walked out from the door sill, and Chao XiaoShu opened the oil paper umbrella, that seemingly was unable to break the wind. The two people simultaneously raised their steps towards the night scene and walked into the rain.

Sang Sang charged out. She stood inside of the entrance, with both hands carrying that big heavy metal wok. Seeing that bowl on the table still had a lot of noodles left, and seeing the back of a figure in that windy and rainy little alley she anxiously yelled, "Master, you still haven't eaten all your noodles!"

Ning Que turned around with a smile gazing at her, and then said, "Just leave it there, when I come back I'll continue eating."

Sang Sang carried that big metal wok, leaning her thin little shoulders against the rain-soaked shop doorway, and loudly called, "When it's cold it isn't good!"

Ning Que waved his hand forcefully; smiling he loudly replied, "Then make another pot, and wait for me to come back to eat."

Sang Sang tightly pursed her little mouth. Seeing him turning to go, she finally yelled out, "I'll put more chopped green onions. Master you have to remember to come back to eat!"

Ning Que didn't respond, but behind the black mask both his eyes had a smile that became more and more strong. Seeing the darker and darker scenery of the alley, and seeing the harder and harder rain, he suddenly spoke up asking, "XiaoShu, where are we going now?"

"Spring Wind Pavilion."

Old Chao calmly replied, "My home is over there.....enemies are also there, and I still suggest that you call me Old Chao, because you are the XiaoShu."

In the alley the wind and rain was as before, not knowing where that Spring Wind Pavilion place was.

*Chun Feng Pavilion = Spring Wind Pavilion

(Note: Wen Rui'an (an author) <<Said Hero, Who's the Hero? (title of one of his works)>> Wang XiaoShi, Bai ChouFei first meet Su MengZhen. (all are characters who are sworn brothers in the novel above, 说英雄谁是英雄 Shuō yīngxióng shuí shì yīngxióng)

Sang Sang carrying a big metal wok standing at the slightly moist shop door finally yelled, "Weekly nomination list is exploding! Need recommendation votes!))

Chapter 53: Who Is Wearing A Wet Blue Shirt At The Edges Of The Pavilion?

The vast majority of people in ChangAn all know that because of a reason that no one knew, Spring Wind Pavilion's Old Chao always wasn't too willing to bring up the name of his own gang: Fish Dragon Gang. He was more willing to call this number one gang the Spring Wind Pavilion. Very many people guessed that this had a connection with him living across Spring Wind Pavilion at 2nd Street since childhood. His enemies secretly sneered at this, believing that it was because he had killed too many people, taken too much evil money, and done too many bad things but was unwilling to have other people call him uncivilized, so they firmly wanted their own gang and the Spring Wind Pavilion connected together with a kind of pleasant name.

Spring Wind Pavilion was located in East City's slum district, with dilapidated buildings that were hard to look at. From daytime to nighttime, it was strung throughout with small peddlers and small vendors mixed with idlers, and wasn't very quiet. Naturally nothing could be called elegant. But the Spring Wind Pavilion area today was particularly calm and quiet – quiet till the sound of rainfall sounded like thunder; quiet till the sound of the spring night breeze blowing past a worn down flat cake shop's sign was like an unleashed wave. From across 4th Street to down to 1st Street, in each street and alley, not a pedestrian could be seen braving to walk through the rain. There wasn't even the sound of a baby crying. It seemed that besides the wind and rain and the cold enshrouding the streets and alleys, everything else completely didn't exist, quiet as death.

From 47th Street facing Spring Wind Pavilion, the distance wasn't too far. The two of them were like tourists on a walk, leisurely going, and without walking for long they walked to these quiet streets and dark

alleys.

The Spring Wind Pavilion in front was hidden in the night scene, hidden amidst the sound of wind and rain, and only vaguely could a worn-down little pavilion be seen. But they didn't know how many enemies were hiding just the same in the night scene of wind and rain inside and outside of the Spring Wind Pavilion.

Wearing a black face mask, Ning Que with a whole stack of things on his back, supported an oil paper umbrella and openly stood behind Chao XiaoShu. He played the role of an assistant fabulously – without knowing when, he took over the umbrella from Chao XiaoShu's hand.

Chao XiaoShu just as before, without his eyes minding his sides, held his hand as he walked. Even though rain water dripping from the oil paper umbrella soaked more than half of the blue shirt on his body, his face still hung a light smile, lighting up the windy, rainy night scene beyond the umbrella several measures.

In the four directions around the little worn down pavilion was deathly silence.

The ambushers in the vicinity completely hadn't thought that it wasn't the three thousand blue shirt brothers as they thought – only Spring Wind Pavilion's Old Chao alone, and bringing a single silent youth with the winds and rain as company rushing in.

A long period of silence – confirming it was only two people, Spring Wind Pavilion's Old Chao and Ning Que, the enemies hiding in the rain and wind of the night scene no longer hid their locations. Accompanied

by the sounds of footsteps continuing without stopping, the tapping and clapping sounds of the clacking of the soles of boots as they hit shallow lakes, and the sound of sharp blades scrapping as they were slowly drawn from their scabbards, several hundred men from the JiangHu with respectful expressions walked out from behind the pavilion, from the middle of the alley, from the side of the residence.

Spring Wind Pavilion's Old Chao and Ning Que stood in a place not far from the dilapidated pavilion, calmly watching the dark mass of a crowds of people flooding out in four fronts from eight directions. Chao XiaoShu smiled, and without asking the youth behind whether or not he feared this kind of uninteresting problem, lifted his arm to wipe rain water from his face, pointing at a tiny fat middle-aged man in the very center of the crowd he said.

"This person is called Lord Meng, master of South City. Beside him the bald big man is called Song TieTou. Lord Meng is Song TieTou's big brother. Song TieTou is exactly that some so-and-so's big brother who went to your shop to cause trouble."

Following the middle-aged man in the blue shirt raising his arm, the crowd besieging them in the night rain suddenly broke into an uproar. The furthest in front with hands carrying sharp blades set up a row in front of their own boss displaying brave men with slightly stiff expressions, subconsciously simultaneously retreating back a step. Ning Que stood behind him calmly watching this scene, roughly understanding the status of the Fish Dragon Gang in ChangAn's Night World, and understanding the hearts of these warriors from the JiangHu. Spring Wind Pavilion's Old Chao's five words had such threatening force.

Chao XiaoShu smiled. Without saying anything to mock the opposing side, he pointed at a thin and tall one of the crowd on the east side, and

he said, "This man is called Jun Jie, the master of West City. Under his command are a good amount of men. Ordinarily I am quite close to not a few of those brothers."

Closely following, he gazed at a small crowd of people standing behind the pavilion, and slightly frowning he said, "Those people are all Uncle Cat's people. Uncle Cat is associated with ChangAn's government. They do things with the utmost lack of morals, and are detestable. Naturally I won't fear him, but since his aunt was a concubine of the clerk of the army, I give him a bit of face and that's all."

"The several of those men are more troublesome. They are all retired from the City Gate Army, and have real gongfu at their disposal. Even more troublesome is that, because I managed those several cargo lines and always didn't need to give them tribute, so the City Gate Army very much have complaints with me. If they are killed, I don't know if the City Gate Army's side would stupidly continue to cause trouble."

Amidst the windy rainy spring night, several hundred people from ChangAn City gathered all around Spring Wind Pavilion in order to surround and kill ChangAn's number one gang's leader, but facing this situation and these circumstances, he instead extremely mildly introduced those people that came tonight without leaving out anyone, and appeared especially patient, or perhaps confident.

Ning Que said in a low voice, "Playing with introductions is okay, but don't introduce me. These are all big shots in ChangAn City. If they know my identity, how would I still be able to pass off in ChangAn's walls?"

"After tonight, if these people aren't all killed, they would very probably kill you horrifically spilling your guts." Spring Wind Pavilion's Old Chao

held his hands towards the crowd in the night rain, and calmly said, "Since it is so, then why should you fear them?"

Ning Que propped the umbrella. Looking at Chao's back, he very earnestly explained, "I'm not afraid of killing people, but I'm afraid of trouble."

Just as the two people were quietly discussing this under the umbrella, the horde in the night rain finally was unable to bear the humiliation of these heroes of ChangAn being treated as nothing. Several behind the discussing two forcefully pushed out the representative of South City's Lord Meng to speak.

At present, even though Spring Wind Pavilion's Old Chao was looking at the place he would inevitably die, however in truth, unless they personally saw this person close his eyes, still no one would dare to be impudent in front of the opposing side. South City's Lord Meng was also this way, but at the moment on this field, he had the most people and the most power, and ordinarily would be the most viciously oppressed by the Fish Dragon Gang. If they didn't appear it couldn't be justified.

"Dividing provisions, transporting supplies, having the military logistics division provide support, watching the surroundings of the Ministry of Revenue – our Great Tang's most lucrative black trades, these years everything has been dominated by you Fish Dragon gangsters, without even splitting out a share of thin soup for the masses of brothers. With the Holy Emperor on the throne, does this world really have these kinds of principles?"

Lord Meng of South City coldly looked at Chao XiaoShu as he said, "You should be very clear about what is called angering the masses. In the

past, the masses of brothers saw you Spring Wind Pavilion Old Chao after years of rising reputation, and gave you three shares of respect. But now since the Imperial Court wants to be clean of you, but you're still stubborn, then don't blame us for being discourteous."

"People associated with the JiangHu aren't always too educated, so again and again they will only say these kinds of words. Years ago I had to personally appear and negotiate with people. These kinds of words I have simply heard enough that I'm about to have calluses."

Chao XiaoShu stood beneath the umbrella, watching South City's Lord Meng speaking directly and calmly, with a slight smile and a light tone. These words were naturally not said for the opposing side to hear, but to Ning Que behind him to hear.

South City's Lord Meng saw that he was so contemptible to him, and his expression became exceedingly unsightly. Heavily stamping the cane in his hand, he shouted, "The Fish Dragon Gang is known to have three thousand blue shirts, but you and I are both clear, those that dare to make you fight desperately are no more than two hundred. Now currently your brothers who can fight the best, have all been suppressed by nobles into the Yu Lin Army's Brave Riders Army. Tonight I'd like to see how you can get out!"

Chao XiaoShu watched his slightly twitching fat face, and suddenly spread out a smile and replied, "First I'll return you a problem. Whether it's dividing provisions, transporting goods, or even transporting by water, that I could dominate these businesses like this for so many years is naturally because I have the qualifications to dominate it. No matter if it's you or Jun Jie or Uncle Cat, not one among you have the ability to dominate these businesses. Even if these businesses were placed right before you, none of you would dare to bite."

"You also don't need to probe to see if I have a means of escape or not. I can tell you, not a single one of the brothers of Spring Wind Pavilion will come into the vicinity of Spring Wind Pavilion. Qi the Fourth is not here, don't you think that's strange? But it's not strange. He and the brothers already went to your homes. I believe by this time, South City and East City and Uncle Cat, your other residences beyond there have already begun to not be peaceful."

In the wake of these words echoing into the dilapidated little pavilion's surroundings, the crowd in the rain instantly became even more agitated. They were here for Chao XiaoShu, always sending people following Chao XiaoShu's whereabouts. How would they think Chao XiaoShu used himself as bait and lured them to this place? And then sent all of the Fish Dragon Gang's forces to their lairs!

"Too late for disaster, the wife and children are at home!" The retirees from the City Gate Army harshly berated, "Chao XiaoShu, you go too far in your aggression!"

Chao XiaoShu's facial expression became slightly cold, soon after slightly shaking his head he said, "You people surrounded my house door to kill me. If I didn't get my family to scatter leaving ahead of schedule, would this be regarded as a family calamity? But you people rest assured, I Spring Wind Pavilion's Old Chao always do things with rules, with principles. I don't intend to you kill people on my own house door, and make your parents, wives, and children grieve heart-broken."

Slightly pausing, he looked at everyone and calmly said, "However after tonight, don't think you will still have family within ChangAn's city walls."

Don't think you will still have family within ChangAn's city walls.

A brief simple sentence and it immediately made very many scenes emerge in the minds of everyone in the area —— Spring Wind Pavilion's Old Chao's five words faithfully pledged; he said he wouldn't move on everyone but their relatives certainly wouldn't move —— However, in the slightly cold spring rain night, one's family's old elders, ill mothers, wives, and children being roughly driven away from their homes, and immediately their own homes and shops that they had operated for many years turning into destroyed gravel by that Fish Dragon Gang's blue shirt men, who could accept this kind of thing taking place on them?

South City Lord Meng's fat face twitched again, his hand supporting the umbrella didn't cover all of the rain. This one twitch unexpectedly ejected several rain beads from his flesh, and he said in a cold voice, "Without a house you can rise again, but if people die there is no way to live again. As long as we kill you Old Chao of Spring Wind Pavilion, the JiangHu will be different from now on. ChangAn City is ours!"

"ChangAn City is forever His Majesty the Emperor's." Chao XiaoShu slightly smiled with ridicule. Bowing his head to look at the sword he was wearing at his waist, he raised his head to reveal his face with a convincing smile, saying, "You said that you want to kill me. Have you see me in action?"

The Ning Que behind his back collapsed the oil paper umbrella, randomly tossing it aside underfoot. His right hand lifted to stretch backwards towards the slanted handle of the Rain Cloud Blade on his back.

Chao XiaoShu slowly stretched his hand to grasp the sword handle on

the side of his waist. Just at the instant his slender fingers were about to grasp the hilt moistened from rainwater, only the blue shirt on his body slightly flapping could be seen and countless raindrops shot out creating a tiny watercolor, as bewildering as a fog.

The gently smiling middle-aged man became stern with the intent to kill, as if he changed into a different person. All around him was the cold and desolate rain.

It seemed that he felt a little something at last – silently he swayed leaning to evade, and there wasn't another drop that dared to fall on that blue shirt body.

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Chapter 54: In The Night Rain, A Legend Reappears

These years gone by, the entire place of ChangAn City was entirely the Fish Dragon Gang's world. Everyone knew that the upper level of the Fish Dragon Gang had a branch that was very good at fighting, stern characters who were completely unordinary people in appearance: Chang Third Cold, Qi Fourth Ruthless, Liu Fifth Wild, Liu Sixth Fierce, Chen Seventh Dark. Besides the vicious Qi Fourth climbing up from the very bottom level of the JiangHu, if the others of those characters were released as they wished in West City or South City, they could absolutely easily carve out a piece of the JiangHu.

Very many people thought they wouldn't be resigned to their current positions, thinking they would leave the Fish Dragon Gang and seek their own world; they would search for an opportunity to leave, even betraying the leadership, but so many years had passed, and these five men still followed closely in the wake of their big brother, not even leaving with a single step astray —— because their big brother was the Spring Wind Pavilion's Old Chao.

Inside ChangAn City, very rarely had someone seen Spring Wind Pavilion's Old Chao in action – it's more accurate to say, years ago, those that had seen Spring Wind Pavilion's Old Chao act had long already died, but no one dared to underestimate him, and even less would they think he could only prattle about brotherly camaraderie as a paper tiger without any thunderous methods. Because anyone understood, that to be able to have Chang Third wait on him, he was truly an unwavering person. It was impossible that the sword at his waist was merely a scholar's decoration on the waist.

This name of Spring Wind Pavilion's Old Chao hovered as a shadow

over all his enemies. They wanted to see what kind of winds and rains it would bring after this person unsheathed the sword at his waist, but no one dared to go test, because they knew that once this person's sword at his waist was unsheathed, they knew that the dark night in ChangAn would inevitably incur a shower of blood and bloody-scented wind.

Sensing that everyone on their own side had been intimidated into a stop by Chao XiaoShu's motion of grasping his sword, South City's Lord Meng widened his eyes. With a voice of absolute severity he shouted, "He's just one person, not a god, everyone advance!"

In all eternity, there were no few hot-blooded, muddle-headed foolish men, patiently looking for an opportunity to kill a legend in the JiangHu and become famous in one move, being encouraged by numbers of comrades all around into bravery by the crowd's atmosphere. Following Lord Meng of South City's stern yell, several hundreds of ChangAn's gangs raised the blades in their hands, and with great shouts they charged over from all sides!

"I just want to go home."

Chao XiaoShu looked at the enemies charging towards him saying these kinds of words, then foolishly startled by a clanging noise, they broke through the rain of the alley opposite of the worn pavilion. The straight sword at his waist was like a flood dragon out of the sheath – outside as though it was slow, in fact it quickly thrust towards the person charging furthest ahead.

Ning Que watched Chao XiaoShu's back, his right hand already grasping his broad sword's handle, but hadn't drawn that recently sharpened, extremely sharp plain blade, because he wanted to see the

real strength of this legend of ChangAn's dark night. At the same time he felt that gentleman XiaoShu's previous words were excessively pretentious, and was a bit worried once he drew the blade, he would be chopped to death by one mistake in a lightning flash.

Chao XiaoShu's sword's style was very ordinary – ordinary length and ordinary width, and the location of the edge was also not in the least special, just that in the instant of the quick motion shooting raindrops scattering, he was vaguely able to see very many fine lines on the blade's body – those thin lines weren't some kind of talisman language, but rather appeared to be many fine cracks repaired by quicksilver.

When excessively arrogant people say truthful words, that would make people mistakenly think they are pretentious. Ning Que stared at that straight sword, seeing that ordinary sword change that thrust at the very last moment into a slap, precisely and relaxingly slapping onto that man's chest, and finally understood Spring Wind Pavilion's Old Chao's words weren't at all pretentious, rather this person was in fact very arrogant.

The smooth sword body in the air was forcibly bent by a certain amount of force into a curved shape. Compared to its speed, the raindrops in the night sky fell slowly, making people's hair stand stiff. And just as that sword's body slapped against that man's chest, that portion of strength suddenly passed through from the sword's body, with a *~pah* sound, and directly turned that part of his chest struck by the sword into a deep pit!

One sound like the deep enormous boom from heavy leather!

One sound of the grunt of a miserable howl!

That brave man charging furthest in front of the crowd from the South City gang didn't even have time to clearly see Chao XiaoShu's face, and was directly swatted like a mere kite, extremely miserably breaking through the air flying, flying past the dilapidated Spring Wind Pavilion, falling tens of zhang(~meter) away!

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It was as the several hundred gang mob that was yelling cacophonously 'kill' were suddenly silenced, their gaze subconsciously followed that comrade drawing an especially long arc through the rainy night sky, and very quickly were met with dread seizing their bodies, and the hands waving blades became cold.

They had once imagined that when Spring Wind Pavilion's Old Chao's sword at his waist was drawn it could swipe a burst of bloody wind, or perhaps there would fall a spell of bloody rain, but never had they imagined that a single thin, blue steel sword could unexpectedly knock a heavy person flying so far. A thin sword with one swipe contained frightening strength – unexpectedly like a great hammer in the hands of a god, one move and heaven and earth's four directions would move!

No, that sword wasn't the metal hammer in the hands of a god, it was more like a steel mace in the hands of an immortal!

Those men of the JiangHu who charged near Chao XiaoShu had been shocked stiff by this thunderous strike where they stood, but Chao XiaoShu didn't stop and amidst the rain advanced his steps. He casually grasped the sword and went, with each step he tread a small flap carrying

a small part of a blue shirt waved a blow. When waving, the flat thin sword hummed like a cry, using the state of the utmost extreme bend to shoot out, like a steel whip whistling as it waved, wrapping raindrops and cool winds with a *~pah ~pah* striking out; each sword strike out had a person's figure flying up!

When the sword's body hit the chest, people flew horizontally crashing into the lane walls, spitting blood and sliding to fall; when the sword's body hit the legs, they slipped head first, it split the skies, with bones cracking and blood spraying as they fell to the ground. The sword waving split the rain with a deep humming cry, and the people unceasingly flew horizontally out with miserable fearful howls piercing the previously deathly silent area of the Spring Wind Pavilion.

All the way going forward Chao XiaoShu waved his sword with relaxed movements at will, so much that it could use be described as hardly caring, resembling chasing away mosquitoes on a summertime night. His facial expression didn't have the slightest change, as if he was very tranquil. Also stepping quickly, Ning Que followed closely behind his body but was again unable to maintain calm – amidst the night rain his matchlessly bright pupils flashed a look of shock.

Using a light blade to strike the bodies of enemies flying, it wasn't that they were choosing the simpler way and more labor-saving method of stabbing their enemies – Chao XiaoShu's actions in front for a moment made him somewhat confused. Now he just realized, only this way could Chao XiaoShu have the ability to maintain a circle of empty space around his body from start to finish, avoiding being surrounded by the opposing side.

But this kind of extremely tyrannically rough and even arrogant way to fight, clearly consumed very much physical strength and concentration –

if Chao XiaoShu didn't think to use this way of awing several hundred violent men on the spot, then that exactly meant that he had confidence of directly beating to death all of the enemies!

Ning Que saw Chao XiaoShu's back, seeing this middle-aged man rampantly advancing in the middle of this night rain, seeing men occasionally fly out with miserable howls at his sword, seeing those distantly located in muddy water groaning and not getting up, he pursed his lips thinking:

"I know you are strong, but I didn't think that you would have such strength."

Hiding inside the crowd were those several ChangAn City big shots. This moment for a long time their states of mind entirely cracked – they today finally saw Spring Wind Pavilion's Old Chao draw his sword, but they would rather be willing to never see it this lifetime. Ordinarily, they all lived quite well in the Fish Dragon Gang's shadow. Thinking that the gap between both sides wasn't very large, if they exerted their full might they could still go and have a fight – until this very moment, inside the cold and desolate spring rain, these people only now coldly discovered that the truth was actually so cruel.

They were able to subsist, it's just that because the Fish Dragon Gang and that one middle-aged man fundamentally disdainfully looked at them.

Legends are legendary not just in the JiangHu, the brothel was still above the bureaucracy. To be able to become a legend in people's memories there must be a reason to become a legend, and this absolutely wasn't because a legend hadn't appeared for many years had

somewhat changed.

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Chapter 55: Chao Xiaoshu! Chao Xiaoshu!

Seeing those ordinarily peerless underlings being smacked flying easily by that middle-aged man's sleeve, and seeing the opposing side coming closer and closer, South City's Lord Meng, Jun Jie and Uncle Cat – these unreserved of the Night Scene, distinguished and admired ruthless figures of South City and West City; their bodies began to slightly tremble, and had no way of suppressing the birth of the strong desire to retreat.

However, thinking of the true noble that stood behind them, and thinking that those two in government were truly strong, they clenched their teeth, and emitting their most severely fierce roar, "Everyone charge together and surround him to death! Throw the axes!"

The severe roar reverberated throughout the streets and alleys of the Spring Wind Pavilion. Quite strangely, after hearing the words 'surround him to death', it drummed up the remaining braves of those gang mobs carrying blades, roaring as they charged in front using the fastest speed to disperse. Using their lives to keep away from Chao XiaoShu's and Ning Que's sides, the crowd in front spread out, revealing two rows of strong men — those men were wearing coarse cloth belts tied to their waists, and on each cloth belt carried four small axes. In their hands they already had two small axes, ready to throw them!

Great Tang's folk customs promoted warrior spirit, from the Imperial Court to the rural areas flowed with a swift and brave atmosphere. Thus the capital ChangAn didn't prohibit carrying swords, even for weapons of the plain class. As long as you didn't draw it in the middle of a busy area and carelessly swing it, the government wouldn't mind you. However for bows and arrows, supervision was comparatively stricter for this kind of

long-ranged weapon, especially the enormously powerful crossbow that was even strictly prohibited among commonfolk. In this kind of situation, tens of flying axes splitting the air became the most terrifying method!

In the night rain, melee had arrived. For the first time, Chao XiaoShu's calm expression changed. He saw two rows of flying handaxes from a distant wall, and with a fearless expression without even alertness and only slightly frowning, seemingly only feeling that it was a bit troublesome, he shook his head and said a sentence, "You know what you should do."

These words were naturally said to Ning Que, but Ning Que..... didn't know what he should do at this moment. If the opposing side's flying axes came flying like the rain, he was confident he himself could flee, but at the same time he believed that Chao XiaoShu would either be killed or before defeating everyone, wouldn't choose to leave. Just in this instant, he saw Chao XiaoShu's back, and suddenly he thought of the battlefield at North Mountain crossing. Thinking of the words Old Lu QingChen said, his eyes flashed with a bit of a different expression.

As though he heard the sound of shock in his mind, Chao XiaoShu brought that single, weak blue steel sword in his hand humming over at an extremely high speed, rapidly vibrating, making the rainwater and bloody water on the body of the sword shake into bits. Then yelling out and disappearing, he flew towards those two rows of flying hand axes!

It truly was a fast and swift sword like a gray blurry flowing image – with the sword's slight essence, subtle and small, the sword tip went towards those chaotically scrambling raindrops suspended in the night sky like beads of spring dreams and pierced them apart. It pierced the outermost layer of the rain beads, thoroughly piercing their hearts, and again pierced through, the outmost layer of skin, and again piercing through

flesh and bone, and again piercing through. The fingers firmly holding onto the axe handles were like lotus root sections, piece by piece falling down, and after breaking open it then began to spray blood!

In front of the alley between the walls, only the *pi pi pa pa* sound could be heard of the straight sword's tip piercing through raindrops, and the *zeng zeng zeng zeng* sound of severing fingers. It was ultimately uncountable how many fingers firmly holding onto axe handles followed the raindrops together sprinkling down. Then the heavy hand axes each followed, falling to the ground and smashing onto the ground full of rainwater with a muffled sound, at last before hearing the sound of countless wretched howls!

Two of them with the fastest reactions with the fastest axe hands, when Spring Wind Pavilion's Old Chao raised his sword at first, they already threw out the axes in their hands. Then instantaneously like a flash of lightning or an ember, that streak of gray blur of a sword image easily swept past their wrists. Just seeing a whirlwind of blood, they unexpectedly threw out the axes and their hands at the same time, then drew out wretched lines of blood, ghastly falling not too far on the floor – the scene was exceptionally bloody!

The Spring Wind Pavilion under the night rain was in dead silence. Chao XiaoShu stood amidst the rain, watching the mob of several hundreds of ChangAn City's gangs in the four directions, watching his own flying sword appearing and disappearing triggering waves of miserable howls, with his whole face calm and unmoved.

South City's Lord Meng's face was pale, trembling as he pointed at Chao XiaoShu outside the pavilion, and deranged like an insane woman he shouted, "Chao XiaoShu!Chao XiaoShu! Chao XiaoShu how can you be..... a cultivator! You..... how can you be a Great Sword Master!"

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“What kind of person do you need at your side?”

“Fast enough, ruthless enough, brave enough. When he kills people he doesn’t blink, and can’t let anything fall onto my body.”

Ning Que stared at Chao XiaoShu’s back in front of him, seeing those two hands dangling outside of the blue shirt sleeves slightly trembling, his body couldn’t help but to feel a bit stiff. That thin sword drew a soundless and stirless gray shadow finally proved his guess, and he finally understood the words from inside the shop before.

Amidst that battle at North Mountain Crossing, that Great Sword Master who had been expelled from the Academy had a warrior servant close to his side. After Lu QingChen used a scheme to entice him to kill that Great Sword Master, he waited for the first moment to kill that servant. It was exactly because that Sword Master studied this kind of cultivation that when in battle, he most feared being killed by people getting close – just like this moment when Spring Wind Pavilion’s Old Chao finally showed his true strength.

At the moment Chao XiaoShu’s psychic powers were completely tied up in that blurry unpredictable flying sword above. Seemingly otherworldly powerful, but without a sword in hand, he already lost all of his defensive ability. If someone of the opposing side could break through that flying sword, and quietly without sound sneak up near him, he would fall into utmost danger.

Surely Chao XiaoShu in past years had fierce fights, and at his side definitely had those rumored to be fierce brothers as bodyguards. But tonight his brothers had all been locked down by the officials in government in their camps, so he needed to find someone, someone he could trust, as well as powerful enough that he could protect his body at close range.

So in the pitter-patter of the spring rain he went to 47th Street, went into that calligraphy shop called the Old Brush House, stood outside on the ground of that dripping wet door sill, looking at that youngster in the middle groaning a sigh and eating noodles, and with a slight smile said:

"I want to go kill people."

"I need a person at my side."

Chao XiaoShu only knew what kind work Ning Que had done in the past, but didn't know what kind of person he was, but like this it seemed that he voluntarily entrusted his safety and even his life to him – without a doubt this was a gamble.

This gamble, or perhaps to say trusting someone, made Ning Que feel a bit heavy on his shoulders. He took a deep breath, his right hand like a tiger's mouth slightly tightened. Tightly grasping that blade handle on his back angled towards the sky, he slowly pulled out that plain blade that shone like snow without any scratches.

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Rainwater fell to the floor, ordinarily gathering dust it quickly stained, gradually collecting into a stream towards the street's sidewalk gutter, then quickly emitting a stench from this year's filthy dirt. It was precisely the environment that ChangAn City's rats loved most. Rats that always had ulcers in their fur used their two filthy black claws on human fingers that had been chopped off, excitedly without stopping they gnawed, occasionally resting to lick the blood off their fur. Up above that human melee on the horizon did not matter to them, they only hoped that the blurry shadow could cut off even more fingers, hoping that the rain water could rush those fingers right in front of them. A blessing from Lord Clear Sky, the family big and small these days will depend on your bestowments.

With a clapping sound, a lump of something whizzed smashing over – smashing just in front of this rat's front, splashing the flooded filthy water and blood on the ground. Did Lord Clear Sky feel that I was too greedy and so wanted to smash me to death? The rat was very much shocked and quickly ran away, nearly digging into the rat hole underneath the courtyard wall under its feet, a bit unwillingly turning to glance at a finger nearly gnawed to bones, but firmly decided to flip its tail and drill inside. If it looked twice, and discovered that the lump that splashed filthy water and blood was a human's head, it would've definitely regretted its decision.

The rat drilled out of its rat hole, and had no way of regretting, as it was stomped into meat paste by a solid Tang Army's military boot in an instant, not knowing if its regret was that it hadn't told its kind that human flesh had such wonderful flavor.

An elite of the Tang Army private soldiers slowly pulled back his foot wearing military boots. Glancing at the mouse changed into indistinct bloody flesh by his foot, and hearing a voice outside the courtyard walls,

he slowly walked and returned to formation, using hand signals to a colleague gesturing the situation of the battle outside, then bowing and glancing at the crossbow in his hands, verifying that the rainwater hadn't caused problems with the machine's spring.

Several dozens of Tang military elites wearing dark rain cloaks silently and quietly stood at the rear of the courtyard wall, their hands holding crossbow arrows. Outside the wall of that shabby Spring Wind Pavilion all around now the sounds of killing shook the heavens, but there weren't any people that discovered their presence. The silence of these officers resembled a group of stone carvings – regardless if it was wind and rain or fighting in close quarters it was all incapable of making their facial expressions have the slightest change.

Behind these elite Tang troops, inside of a house locked by layer upon layer of rainwater, sat two people on wooden floorboards. One person was a middle-aged person with smart brows and eyes, his whole body was covered in a star-white robe and beside his body was a calmly placed, somewhat small sword on top of the wooden floor. Another person wore a bamboo rain hat and his countenance couldn't be seen, but from the monk robes he was wearing, and the wide, large, and filthy pair of bare feet and the copper alms bowl in front of him under the rim of his hat, he must be an ascetic monk.

That long robed swordsman slightly frowned looking at the rain curtain in front of his eyes like threads of silk. He softly said, "Unexpectedly it is a Sword Master, no wonder the two of us were needed."

The Ascetic Monk lowered his head without speaking, he faintly heard the sound of a flying sword splitting the air hacking coming from outside the wall. He stared at the copper alms bowl below the wooden stairs, watching the rainwater in the copper alms bowl's interior disturbed by

newly incoming raindrops disturbing it to no peace. Gradually he felt that his own Sea of Qi also became somewhat disturbed. Then he lowered his head even more, his finger even more slowly but firmly kneaded the ironwood prayer beads from between his wrists.

This estate was Chao Mansion, Spring Wind Pavilion Old Chao's mansion. This wooden open building was a small building for listening to the rain – Spring Wind Pavilion's Old Chao, when he was idle with nothing to do would occasionally come to this little building pretending to be scholar and listen to the rain. These elite Tang troops and these two strong ones were waiting for him to return.

On another side of Chao's mansion, outside the courtyard wall, the spring rain pattered at the opening of the lane where two carriages stopped. In front of the carriage, a noble young horse somewhat couldn't tolerate the spring rain drenching it – from time to time wanting to nose blow its nose but was unable to utter a sound, wanting to kick its two hooves forward but didn't dare to move, and the carriage sunk into a deep deathly silence. Inside the other carriage however from time to time came the sound of low, deep coughs.

There wasn't anyone that knew who was inside these two carriages, but if Chao XiaoShu now could see the fatty standing beside the carriage, they could certainly guess that the people inside the carriage weren't ordinary people. That person that looked like a common middle-aged fatty wasn't famous in ChangAn City. On his body there wasn't any official rank identification, however when very many government officials saw that him they would all sing a charming tune, because very many people all knew, when His majesty the Prince had to manage some inconvenient affairs, all were carried out and handled by him.

However a person like this, compared to the Prime Minister's

housekeeper was an even more awesome figure. Even if drenched all over by ice-cold spring rain, he also didn't dare to sit and enter the carriage to avoid the rain, rather slightly bending his back openly standing near the carriage, his attitude especially humble.

Chapter 56: The Carriage In The Rain, And Again Three Swords

Cold rainy night, Spring Wind Pavilion, Alley outside of Chao Mansion

That middle-aged fat man stood beside the carriage. Standing in the rain, he bent over and said in a low voice, "Chao XiaoShu is indeed a cultivator. It seems like his realm isn't low either, right now the situation seems thorny....."

The person inside of the carriage coughed twice, and indifferently said, "What's so pressing? Doesn't the mansion also have the two people the Ministry of Revenue hired? If even those two can't stop that guy from the JiangHu, if we also attack it won't be too late..... as for those people of the JiangHu that died, in this ChangAn City's dark gutters, how many days are there where rats don't die?"

Several hundred of the ChangAn City's braves of the JiangHu flooded over from four sides and eight directions. In a skilled person's eyes in the distance, they were just like rats in a dark gutter, exploding in this moment of life or death of an extremely amazing person's fighting strength and bloodiness.

But Spring Wind Pavilion's Old Chao was a cultivator, and they were just ordinary people of the JiangHu. The gap between the two side's fighting strength was like that of an eagle and ant in distance. The sword's figure pierced in a leg and through it, carrying a spray of flowery blood, then revolving around a neck and lopping off a very big head and cutting a man's fingers carrying an axe; men wielding blades fell down in the rain. Before that at times seen and unseen sword's figure, the fighting strength of those strong men weren't even worth a single stroke – before those

brave men's bloodiness, if their companions weren't falling over backwards, they would always be hopelessly breaking and scattering.

Chao XiaoShu calmly advanced – his body's blue robe had long been soaked by the rainwater, but each time Ning Que saw him it was like that. No one would think that this number one man of ChangAn's "night work" was having a hard time as he walked inside of the rain as naturally as the spring rain. The aura exuded from his body was like the spring rain moistening the earth, making people feel there was no way to resist so much so that they didn't want to resist.

The mob that came from ChangAn's West City and South City saw the middle-aged man coming towards them in the rain, as though seeing a demon acting refined and cultured nodding to them hinting at something – then raising demonic claws and calmly squeezing them into pieces. They, with horror filling their hearts, had no way of suppressing the fear in their hearts. Not knowing who called out, the crowd finally scattered.

Those several people, South City's Lord Meng and West City's Jun Jie and also Uncle Cat had already unknowingly already slipped away quietly. In the four directions of the worn down Spring Wind Pavilion, besides those bodies being constantly washed by the rushing rain water and those heavily wounded groans of the injured, not one person could be seen standing. Between heaven and earth there was a slice of peacefulness – if you ignored those dead and wounded in the rain, suddenly the falling rain water had no way of rinsing the smell of blood and the smashed corner of the Spring Wind Pavilion.

Ning Que silently following behind Chao XiaoShu wanted to walk in front. His two hands tightly held onto his blade's handle, with the sharp blade's body across his chest drenched in the rainwater. From beginning to end, he hadn't used it once. This one-sided massacre ended just like

this, but he even less was about to relax with an embarrassed apology, because he knew that the real battle had yet to come. If you had the chance to follow a battling cultivator, then there is an extremely high chance that the enemies you meet may even be several cultivators.

One step, two steps – Chao XiaoShu walked to the front door of his own home's courtyard. The sheath on his body swordless, that sword was passing through who knows where in the night rain, and he stretched out his two empty hands and lightly pushed. The hinge of the door soaked by the rainwater gave a bit of a strange groan.

The courtyard's door was pushed open, and tens of elite Tang troops wearing dark rain coats carrying crossbows greeted them, with their expressions unswervingly cold. After listening to the rain behind the curtain of rain in rain-listening pavilion with the wooden planked floor, the brow of the middle-aged man wearing starry white robes faintly knitted. The short sword at his side lowly cried. The ascetic wearing a bamboo hat slowly raised his head, the rosary in his hands slightly stiffened. The two horse carriages far away in an alley remained calm as before, the coughing sound from one of the carriages went who knows where.

Tranquility was still tranquility, the sound of light calm winds among the tree leaves between roof pillars lightly rustled and the sound of pattering rain between the courtyard and the small pond lightly sounded. Each looked at the other, no one chose to be the first to attack.

Silence for perhaps quite a while, or perhaps very short, – Chao XiaoShu's gaze crossed the sergeant of the group carrying crossbows, falling onto the ascetic monk and the swordsman in the pavilion, and lightly said, "This is my home. Please leave."

"No one will leave." The swordsman dressed in the starry white robes calmly responded.

Chao XiaoShu saw at this person's side the short sword lightly shaking with a craving cry. As though he had a thought, suddenly he spoke up and asked, "During the rain a few days ago, was it you that killed my little brother?"

The robed swordsman's body slightly leaned forward, indicating he was exactly that person.

The corners of Chao XiaoShu's lips slightly stuck up, looking at him he said, "Then today you'll be the first to die."

The rain fell as always, following the tiles of the rain-listening pavilion, flowing to the eaves down to become a watery curtain. The copper bowl in front of that ascetic monk constantly bore rainwater, gradually accumulating – gradually it became a lot, and just in this moment it finally overflowed out.

Chao XiaoShu attacked.

He raised his right arm, parting the heavy curtain of rain, parting those elite Tang troops tightly grasping crossbows waiting, towards that robed swordsman in the rain-listening pavilion far far away.

With just one finger pointing out, in the rainy night suddenly echoed with a shrill cry. That thin blade hidden from beginning to end in the

night scene finally revealed a trace, like a flash of lightning piercing towards his own rain-listening pavilion!

The robed swordsman's pupils shrunk, the middle finger of his right hand hanging at his side tightened once, and shot once. With the short sword at his side already hungrily jumping, with a clear whisper it jolted out, transforming into a clear light guarding in front of him.

Chao XiaoShu said that today the first person that had to die was him – Chao XiaoShu parting the curtain of rain and pointing was also him, but Chao XiaoShu's first sword's objective wasn't him, but rather that ascetic monk at his side!

Although that ascetic monk was silent throughout, but he was constantly alert, watching around for movement and the sound of activities nearby. Overhead the heaven and earth energy had some slight fluctuations, and he plainly knew that Chao XiaoShu was already about to act. Although he didn't know that he was a target of the sword himself, however a disciple of Buddha's instinct allowed his withered up palm to severely beat a board beside him. Within the shock of the smoke and dust of the wooden board, only the copper alms bowl in the front of the wooden stairs was as if it was kicked by someone; suddenly missiles flew up moving in the sky in countless splashes.

The gray light of the sword figure cleaved through the air and arrived, penetrating through that those splashes as sparkling and translucent as glazed tiles, but it was blocked head-on by the copper alms bowl. The high-speed, sharp, and thin sword and the thick and clumsy copper alms bowl viciously collided, issuing a clear and loud sound that made people's eardrums want to split!

The ascetic monk's face revealed outside his bamboo rain hat was somewhat dark – at this moment it changed to become extremely pale, obviously he suffered some losses, and at this time, the long gown sword master's pair of eyebrows jumped. With a strangely mechanical wrist flick, in the two fingers used to eat together executed towards Chao XiaoShu who was standing at the front gates of his mansion. All around his body the short sword strongly flew in a half circle in a dance abruptly canceled its force into a sharp turn, transforming into a single blade of blue light stabbing straight for Chao XiaoShu's front. At this moment Chao XiaoShu's flying sword directly collided with the Ascetic monk's copper bowl, now in what way can he defend his own body?

Ning Que, tightly gripping the long blade and silently standing behind Chao XiaoShu's back moved, his body rapidly flashed to dodge to the left. Just when he was about to dodge away from Chao XiaoShu's body, he was forced to halt his step. He didn't fear that long robed sword master's methods, and wasn't afraid of that blue light short sword – rather he now found that as before, it was unnecessary for himself to act.

Because Chao XiaoShu's flying sword crashed into the back of the ascetic monk's copper alms bowl, although it didn't break the alms bowl, but it also didn't fall to the ground broken. Rather borrowing the strength of the fierce strike, the cracks and streaks with unknown use on the thin blue steel sword, in a split second they abruptly enlarged separating from the sword – extremely fantastically in the sky they transformed into five thin swords – the blades quickly flew and shot out!

In the middle of no way of being able to survive, one becomes three, and three becomes five.

Chao XiaoShu's one sword transformed into 5.

.....

.....

Chapter 57: A Battle Of Both People

Chao XiaoShu's single sword became five.

Three swords made chi chi sounds as they evaded the copper bowl, shooting towards the ascetic monk's body. The remaining two swords didn't return back to protect his body, rather completely ignoring the robed swordsman's blue ray short sword, they sharply tilted and stabbed right towards him!

Even if it was a battle of cultivators, this blue robed middle-aged man was meanwhile still concentrating on ChangAn JiangHu's cold, fierce and very fiery meaning: If today you kill me, you'll still die. I've been a cultivator in ChangAn's underworld for many years, I don't fear death or anything else. You that has cultivated for many years under the wing of famous mountains and big rivers, do you fear death?

The robed swordsman feared death – with his face slightly pale, he bet on this sword attack, one scattering, one striking, forcefully recalling the blue light short sword that was firmly flying out half way from the ground. In the instant of the most dangerous moment, it struck the two swords attacking towards his eyes. In this one movement it made his right hand slightly tremble; on the back of his white hand, blue veins could be seen.

Beside him that ascetic monk's expression was heavily concentrated on those three swords attacking his body. Already it was too late to recall that heavy copper bowl to protect his body, only hearing him clumsily shouting a vague word, and throwing the prayer beads hanging between his thumb and forefinger hovering in the air, it whizzed as it rotated around his body in a whirl. The only thing visible was a flower of flames in

four directions, instantly and unexpectedly, inside the trail of those three swords were collisions who knows how many times!

The sword's shadow arrived and pierced air, and the copper bowl carrying water rose. The blue light short sword pierced straight through the mansion's door, and the dull gray shadow became five swords. The blue light short sword fled like lightning backwards, and the prayer beads floating guarded it, each section containing terrifying danger. As long as there was a single mistake among these three powerful fighters, someone would die spraying blood.

In the world of the strong, the scale of time is fundamentally different. This seemed like a complicated, dangerous and long course of events, but in the real world it was only the utmost shortest instant. In fact the water spilling over from that copper bowl was still in mid-air transforming into splashes of glass tiles that hadn't ever hit the floor, brimming with rainwater as it was still slowly knitted a rain curtain, and those elite Tang troops carrying crossbows had absolutely no reaction.

Sudden! Sudden! Suddenly sudden!

The Tang elite troops used the absolute shortest amount of time to make their reaction – quickly squeezing the trigger, tens of bolts carrying the powerful sound of wind-ripping force shot towards the mansion entrance. In this moment, those five swords were in the middle of battle with those two cultivators inside the rain-listening pavilion, and Chao XiaoShu completely had no ability to protect himself. Soon, he could only watch as those crossbow bolts shot him into a hedgehog.

And just in this moment, just as the bolts were fast about to arrive into the front of Chao XiaoShu's body, one slice of a shiny, gleaming snow-

bright blade shone in the courtyard, matchlessly bright compared to the layers upon layers of the rainy curtains, rolling all of that tight cluster of bolts into it!

Boots struck watery puddles on the ground in Chao Mansion's main gate, like nails chiseling into the ground. With two hands firmly gripping onto the blade's handle as resolute as steel, who knows when Ning Que circled around in front of Chao XiaoShu. The muscles of his wrist and forearm flexed tight at a speed difficult to imagine and relaxed, driving that snow-bright plain blade swiftly swiveling around upwards, changing into a silvery circular shield, illuminating that old black mask on his face, and shaking those densely packed crossbow bolts flying.

Bang bang a slice of tinkling shattering sounds shown before the two people, and tens of crossbow bolts were firmly shaken flying away by the powerful blade at quick speeds angling in all directions, sticking above the sign board of Chao Mansion, closely followed with a flurry of thud thud sounds echoing out.

Tens of crossbow bolts unexpectedly fell like rapid rain, even if Ning Que's blade techniques were even better, he had no way of being completely blocking. But in this moment his pupil shrank, his sight became keen to the max just like an eagle flying in the open sky of a prairie, making all the details of everything in front of him seem crisp and clear. His state of mind was also as calm as an eagle, relying on his senses to intercept the angles of firing crossbow bolts, he only waved his blade for those crossbow bolts that could injure himself and Chao XiaoShu, and not paying the least attention to those periphery bolts.

In this instant, from a young man who had gone through countless struggles of life and death, out emerged those frightfully perfectly polished sense of danger and judging ability. Those crossbow bolts that

seemed especially dangerous brushed against his ear lobe, penetrating headlong through his robe fiercely, piercing a crack into that rain-soaked limestone tile, without causing any other harm.

“Attack!” The leader of the Tang elite troops sternly yelled.

Following the sound of this order, the Tang elite troops that fired one round of bolts split into two groups – one group quickly pulled the triggers and fired bolts, the other group of ten plus silently drew the steel blades at their waists and came charging head-on at Chao Mansion’s main gate.

Step! Step! Step! Step! A Tang elite troop’s two feet repeatedly tread onto the wet flowing ground, charging over as though tightly following after the last volley of bolts. The distance to the main gate was only a short distance apart – only hearing him howl once, his two hands wielding a blade leapt up high, hacking down towards the top of Ning Que’s head with irresistible force.

The two eyes showing from the black mask slightly lowered. Ning Que looked at the rainy ground in front of him, as though he didn’t see the ferocious, reckless strike just about to land. Only seeing his wrist flick, the blade’s edge became a white brightness, incomparably precisely hacking at the last two crossbow bolts, then..... the blade’s gleam suddenly stopped, disappearing unseen.

In the deep pitch black of the rainy night, hidden inside of the building there was light. When the blade was raised, the edge that shone from big movements became a bright surface, if it is desired for the blade’s shine to disappear without a trace, then there was only one possibility – then the blade at the moment had to be in a state of stillness.

The common-styled plain blade in his hands, in this moment was in that expert Tang elite troop's neck. The plain blade was wedged deeply into that person's neck roughly halfway through.

The blade's edge tore open the skin, bones and flesh and tightly clamped in. Blood from the very tip of the blade gushed out, then quickly was washed clean by the heavier and heavier rain. Ning Que's left hand held onto the very bottom of the handle, his right hand at the opposite very top of the handle, slightly lowering his head watching the dripping rain splashing on the limestone tiles raising muddy blossoms, and maintaining his deeply lowered knee, he turned waist stance.

Time in this instant seemed to have stopped, but it wouldn't truly stop. Ning Que pulled his left arm like lightning, and the blade's edge in that expert Tang troop's neck made a sound that made people's teeth sour – the sound of that metal grinding against strong neck bones. Just as that expert Tang troop stared as he died with both his eyes open and fell over, Ning Que's left hand tightly gripping the the blade advanced with one leg, and the blade's edge carrying rainwater abruptly jumped up and pierced into a second enemy's throat.

His two hands opposite to his legs grasped the plain blade's long handle, with his steps like tiny leaps to and fro within a range like a quick leopard in the grass. Once Ning Que slashed with his opposite hand chopping at an enemy attacking from the left side, he immediately followed with a body spin abruptly issuing force. The blade's edge cut through the rain curtain, as the edge was cutting through the blade passed through the night scene, cutting the fourth enemy's shoulder in half.

In one face-to-face encounter, four elite Tang troops died underneath his blade; blood from their ravaged bodies sprayed all over. Unexpectedly as though the rain had become even more intense, Ning Que had done as he had promised, not letting a single person or crossbow bolt injure Chao XiaoShu's body. As for that more and more boundless rain, it wasn't something he cared about.

Three cultivators were amidst a battle with the vigor of heaven and earth on the edge of life and death – those elite Tang troops originally thought that they had come across the best opportunity to attack, but they hadn't thought that that youth standing mysteriously behind Chao XiaoShu was unexpectedly such a violent character. Probably intimidated by Ning Que's sharp, strange blade techniques, that black mask in the eyes of the elite Tang troops became a bit terrifying – the steps of their advancing charge subconsciously slowed down some.

Ning Que's pair of hands gripped the blade, that black mask soaked by the rain slowly moved up and down, and his brow frowned.

The Great Tang's army was the most disciplined in the world, and their troops had the greatest fighting strength. Tonight these soldiers in Chao Mansion were of the Great Tang's elite troops; troops of this caliber, no matter if they had come across a fearsome enemy, as long as their superiors didn't give the order to retreat, then they would absolutely not retreat. As long as there were no orders, even if in front of them was an abyss 10,000 fathoms deep, they would still bravely charge over, and absolutely not fearfully slow their steps.

Whoosh whoosh whoosh the sound of triggers from three directions sounded out, the torrential rain plop plopping as it fell down, beating atop the rain-listening pavilion's roof. A thunderous noise sounded out from on top the solid limestone tiles, successfully concealing these three

tiny sounds.

But Ning Que the whole while had not relaxed – he gazed at those fearful unresisting elite Tang troops, his two hands tightly gripping his blade's handle. With a concentrated stare listening in the rainy night for any other sounds, so in the first instant he didn't catch three of the extremely tiny sounds of triggers, at the same time within the first instant he made his own conclusion: the God Targeting Crossbow!

The God Targeting Crossbow was the single most terrifying weapon Tang troops carried. Inside the crossbow was a storing box, that at one time could fire ten crossbow bolts. Even more fearsome was that the God Targeting Crossbow's trigger had a special design – the speed of the crossbow bolts shot out was strangely fast. This weapon had in history brought about countless glory when the Great Tang Empire was on campaign across all under heaven – only unfortunately, the special steel required to make the God Targeting Crossbow was becoming rarer and rarer, thus it was gradually pulled out of the Tang troops' standard issue. Who would've thought that tonight it would actually appear.

In the beginning, the reason the elite Tang troops ambushing in Chao Mansion hadn't used the God Targeting Crossbow was because they didn't have the confidence that they could use the God Targeting Crossbow and successfully shoot Chao XiaoShu dead when he was in good condition, and that juvenile wearing a black mask was unworthy of using the God Targeting Crossbow to deal with. They were originally thinking of using normal crossbow bolts in concert with the ascetic monk and the long-robed swordsman to gradually wear down Chao XiaoShu's strength, and in the very end launch a fatal attack with the God Targeting Crossbow. But now the situation didn't allow for them to do so – because if they didn't use the God Targeting Crossbow, they had no way to even kill that youngster wearing a black mask, much less to mention Chao

XiaoShu.

A raindrop the size of a soybean rolled along from the top of the black mask to the bottom. Within such a short amount of time, Ning Que had realized this much of the situation, and at the same time his left hand had long left the handle of the blade silently without a sound, and extended to his own back, his fingertips had nearly touched that big wrapped black umbrella.

He wasn't those powerful cultivators, he was just an ordinary juvenile. Even though countless bloody melee battles made him change into a bit unordinary, but he ultimately didn't have the confidence to just rely on the plain blade in his hands to handle the God Targeting Crossbow.

Just in that moment, within the rain at Chao Mansion again resonated with a series of small but clear sounds; these sounds were even clearer than the plucking sounds of falling rain drops, more profound than a string instrument master's plucking movements and still faster than a bee's fluttering.

Dingdingdingding.....dingdingding.....dingding.....ding!

Five extremely dim sword shadows silently returned from the rain-listening pavilion who knows when – within the courtyard they flew back and forth like bees in the fields at high speeds in a flying dance, weaving a thick net that didn't even let wind pass. Like an intelligence, they precisely captured each of the trajectories God Targeting Crossbow shots, intercepting all ten of those bolts then striking each of them flying!

Chao XiaoShu stood in the rain, a bit pale in the face. Besides calmness

there were no other emotions. Only visible was his right hand hanging outside of his sleeve slowly opening, and those five swords zoomed creating an echo and flew circling in front of him, like a cage in the four directions in a fast-flying dance with a whistling howl. With the two people inside, the rain surrounding their bodies was being sliced by swords mowing out a hole, displaying white lines.

Chapter 58: Wind, Rain, Night Can Always Enter

Five swords in the rainy night flew at high speed, sounding sometimes deep and low and sometimes with a sharp whistling cry like some kind of weird instrument, each occupying an empty space next to Chao XiaoShu and Ning Que's sides, and unceasingly rotating positions. Five moving brightnesses interlaced all around, making the young branches beaten by the rainwater and the limestone tiles accumulated with water become completely woven tightly together in the empty space of the courtyard.

Amidst the rain, sometimes seen and sometimes unseen, the swords flowed gracefully as they flew, at times brushing against the floor tiles or grazing through, splashing up a plume of rain; at times cutting out a deep sword mark into the walls, and at times flying over the bodies of those four soldiers that Ning Que slew, adding several bloody sword slashes onto bodies of the still not yet dead soldiers. As they were sliced by the sword again they would have a fit of twitching.

Chao XiaoShu and Ning Que both stood within the formless sword net, each streak of the weaving of this net represented a sword tip that couldn't be blocked, representing death. No matter if it was solid limestone tile, or the wall soaked from the rain, or the corpses of the Tang troops lying on the ground, they had no way of slowing down those streaks one bit, or softening them one bit.

The wind could enter, the rain could enter, the night could enter, but a person could not.

There wasn't a person that dared to set foot into this formless great net with a range of 30 feet. Even the bravest of the Tang elites, wouldn't

knowingly enter death and still want to forcefully step in. As for the ascetic monk and the long-robed swordsman in the rain-listening pavilion, at the moment their pale faces were impatiently harmonizing their breathing. The copper bowl, prayer beads and the blue light short sword quietly hovered around them.

The long-robed swordsman from Nan Jin looked astonished at Chao XiaoShu amidst the rain, and bitterly he said, "I hadn't thought that a gang leader from ChangAn City..... was an honorable, top class Great Sword Master, even..... he's just one step short of entering the Fate Seeker realm. Could this be the Great Tang Empire's strength and heritage? In that case, you should be very clear, killing you is the thought of your Tang nobles. You can't win. The nobles have said as long as you surrender, they'll spare your life."

Chao XiaoShu raised his left hand, pulling off a green leaf that had unknowingly landed on his lapel, and then raised his head towards the long-robed swordsman and calmly said, "You killed my brother, so whether you surrender or not, you must die."

The long-robed swordsman was silent and wordless.

The ascetic monk wearing a bamboo rain hat looked at Ning Que beside Chao XiaoShu, looked at the black mask on his face, and looked at his familiar yet slightly strange hair style. Frowning he asked, "Youngster, are you from Yue Lun Kingdom?"

Ning Que returned the ascetic monk with silence, and hadn't made any response, just that his brows slightly knitted together in his black mask.

Chao XiaoShu, turned his head towards those elite Tang troops on the other side of the courtyard. His eyes gradually becoming coldly stern, in a deep voice he said, "One is a Great Sword Master from Nan Jin, one is an ascetic monk from Yue Lun Kingdom, and you guys..... are soldiers from my Great Tang Dynasty. For those so-called big shots to randomly order, to unexpectedly collude with foreign peoples, that really is disgraceful."

The leader of those Tang troops slightly lowered his head, apparently not wanting the boundless rain to confuse his eyes, but also seeming a bit ashamed, unable to face Chao XiaoShu's cold, crushing gaze.

But all battles that have strong cultivators participating, inevitably the whole battle is controlled by the cultivators. Ordinary people like Ning Que and those elite Tang troops could only assist as support from the side, and couldn't influence the course of the battle. When cultivators fought, their mental strength and most importantly their wear of psychic power was extremely fast. In the situation where there is no way to strike an enemy with an attack, they would typically choose to withdraw the attack and harmonize their breathing. With the previous situation, the Tang troops would use the God Targetting Crossbow – Chao XiaoShu was worried Ning Que had no way to react, gambling to recall his swords, thus having this simple conversation in the rainy night.

"Let's end this."

Chao XiaoShu calmly said these words, then raised his hand and pointed towards the rain-listening pavilion – the realm of his strength was above the ascetic monk of the Yue Lun Kingdom and the swordsman of Nan Jin, so he had the strength and the ability to choose when to fight.

Exactly in this instant.

The five swords within the courtyard weaving back and forth seemed to hear a clear command, their movement trajectories suddenly turned; the whistling suddenly became even more shrill, chi chi splitting open the rainy night, stabbing towards the rain-listening pavilion!

The ascetic monk's complexion suddenly tightened, his two eyes fully widened. His two hands between his knees began to rapidly change with hand seals, and the copper bowl floating in front of him hummed flying to meet the enemy. The string of metal and wood prayer beads followed flying after, rotating around his body at high speeds.

The swordsman from Nan Jin hmped, his complexion as white as snow, but his lips were as red as blood. His psychic power penetrated through the Snowy Mountain in the Sea of Qi, tunneling into the breath of heaven and earth in the rain-listening pavilion, controlling that blue light short sword flying up like lightning.

"Not right!"

The ascetic monk's pupils suddenly shrunk. Those lightly gray sword shadows concealed in the boundless spring rain seemed as though they were not there, until they whistled flying towards the rain-listening pavilion, only then did he see clearly that there were only four, and not five!

Where did that last sword go?

The ascetic monk warned the Nan Jin swordsman beside him, but it was already too late.

The most faint sword shadow, silent without sound circumvented the rain-listening pavilion's eaves, evading the perception of the two inside of the building. Following the wooden pillars slipping down, then at the position of half the height of a person, it suddenly quickened, and like a hot blade piercing snow it penetrated through the wooden pillar – in the next instant it appeared behind the Nan Jin swordsman's head!

The Nan Jin swordsman responded to that wisp of cold behind his head, his heart birthing the greatest dread. His two hands hanging out of his sleeves madly moved, that blue light short sword in the air suddenly stopped, but it was already impossible to save its master.

With a light, muffled pu sound, the streak of sword pierced into the back of his head, then punctured through his neck bone. Hanging with blood and shredded flesh, resembling a strange worm that consumed blood, wiggling side to side to fly out!

The eyes of the Nan Jin swordsman stared, looking at Chao XiaoShu in the rain, covering the spraying blood from his throat as he heavily fell backwards face up. Until this moment of death, he finally confirmed that the reaction speed of his opponent was indeed far far beyond his own.

The master had died, losing the psychic power controlling the short sword, it slumped falling into the rainwater, flipping twice it was still. Before that blue light sword was battling two swords with a severe whistling sound, and with the remaining three swords together in one place, attacking at high speeds towards the ascetic monk. Merely five extremely dim small dots, but they resembled a violent storm!

In the middle of the rain, five sharp swords and a clumsy, heavy copper bowl incessantly collided, and at high speeds. The ironwood prayer beads in dancing movements incessantly collided, and sharp and clear ear-piercing like the sonorous ringing sounds intertwined together. As though without interruption, all over behind the ascetic monk was a small flowery golden light like a dandelion, frequently blooming and occasionally being dispersed by the cold wind.

Suddenly, that worn-down robe had countless gashes. The Buddhist School wasn't like an ordinary cultivator's that type was used to wearing soft armors to protect the body; blood from those gashes unceasingly flowed out, turning him into a blood soaked, bloody person.

Chao XiaoShu calmly looked inside of the rain-listening pavilion. His hands hanging outside of his sleeves didn't have any other motions, but inside of the building, those five swords were like five invisible fingers of his, at any time playing the notes for killing people.

His face that had been washed by rainwater was paler by a portion. Chao XiaoShu's brow slightly rose, discovering that the ascetic monk's willpower firmly exceeded what he had estimated. Only seeing him unrestrainedly lifting the blue robe's front lapel, unexpectedly he didn't care about the crossbow rain all around him. With a loud shout he charged towards the elite Tang troops, in this way he sat down in the boundless rain.

He was beside his own mansion's entrance, staring at the enemy inside of a building of his own home. His sword-like eyebrows gradually became flat, and the five slender fingers beyond his sleeve suddenly tightened. Following this movement, those five neither godly nor demonic swords speedily whistled and gathered, again merging into a single sword, without any fanciness, directly stabbing towards that copper bowl!

Just in this moment, beyond yet another surrounding wall at a secluded street opening washed by the great rain without people, one of the two carriages finally slowly began moving, heading for Chao Mansion's main gate. The hoof sounds and the wheel sounds were concealed by the rainwater without a mark or a trace.

Chapter 59: Changan In Chaos

Because the five swords were many swords as one, within the Chao Mansion's courtyard the rain had become indescribably more restless. Seeming as though the night sky had yet another intangible sun, the rain near the rain-listening pavilion unexpectedly began changing to white mist at high speed.

Seeming as though the many were one sword, but in fact it stored countless numbers of the human world's utmost sharpest swords. Chao XiaoShu's massive psyche followed his gaze to the inside of the rain listening pavilion, making that thin blue steel sword stab at high speeds towards that copper bowl, then retreat at lightning speeds, then at an even faster speed stab again. Within an instant it unexpectedly struck continuously several hundred times!

Sword strikes faster than a woodpecker pecking a tree by innumerable multiples extremely terrifyingly struck the copper bowl in the central position, making dudududu sounds. Because of the high frequency of the sword strikes, in between sound after sound, simply nothing could be heard interrupting, such that the people in the courtyard could only hear one prolonged tight striking sound!

"He also can't do it! Get in close and kill him!"

The leader of the Tang troops saw Chao XiaoShu sitting cross-legged in the rain, noticing that his face was becoming more and more pale. With a stern shout, in the moment none of these soldiers needed any discipline or glory to support their actions – they were very clear that they

absolutely had to immediately kill Chao XiaoShu, or if they waited till those swords broke open the copper bowl, killing that ascetic monk from Yue Lun Kingdom, they would then have no chance of killing their opponent, or more accurately said, they would also die.

A thick rain of crossbow bolts again shot out, and tens of swift and fierce objects again came attacking. This time the elite Tang troops seemed even more resolute and absolutely even more valiant, because this absolute fortitude and valiance was forced out by desperation.

They still hadn't been able to get close to Chao XiaoShu's body and kill this Great Sword Master of a fearsome realm, because in front of Chao XiaoShu always stood a youth.

Ning Que moved incessantly in the rain-soaked limestone tiles, not at all alert and seemingly especially heavily. Each time his boots struck the ground there was a splash of water, and each time there was a spray of water, his blade's edge would reap one of the soldiers of the elite Tang troops.

Chao XiaoShu sat cross-legged in the forceful rain, which was the same as completely entrusting his life to him, so from beginning to end he guarded Chao XiaoShu's front and back, using that plain blade in his hands turning it into a net of a path of death in front of him.

The right elbow bent, and the blade sank deeply into a Tang troop's knee. Ning Que didn't have time to pull out the blade, and his right foot shot out like a stone flying out, mercilessly kicking the balls of a Tang soldier. Immediately grabbing onto the slender blade's handle with his two hands in a spin, the blade's edge from below rose upwards, cutting open the belly of a third Tang soldier. Another valiant shadow pounced

over, half squatting on the floor, his waist spun, with a merciless stroke with a single hand wielding the blade, the blade's shine split, slicing unknown numbers of calves.

The black mask had long been soaked by the rain, and the breath passing through carried a bit of moisture, but the eyes exposed outside of the mask were as calm as before. Almost as though they appeared a bit numb, his movements were the utmost simple, but the effect of his lethal wounds were exceptionally horrifying. The blade before him, those brave elite Tang soldiers were like blocks of wood, unceasingly being chopped and kicked over.

No matter how dense the bolt rain was, how cold the blades were, throughout he stood in front of Chao XiaoShu, without retreating one step! Even if his shoulders were scraped by the bolts, even if his legs were slashed up by the edges of blades, he didn't retreat half a step!

From within the rain-listening pavilion came an extremely massive hard to bear sound, like a metal pot being smashed by someone with a brick – the copper bowl in front of the ascetic monk finally was shattered into pieces by thousands of swords!

The bamboo rain hat on top of the ascetic monk's head followed the copper bowl splitting at the very same moment – on his dark face flashed an expression of absolution, and his hand seals again changed. The prayer beads always protecting him all around stopped spinning, suddenly changing into a black flood serpent – making swishing sounds, it coiled around the thin blue steel sword just about to directly attack it to make the sword's force into a meal.

Chao XiaoShu silently looked inside of the pavilion. With his right hand

at his side exposed from his sleeve he accumulated a strand of water, holding up a handful of rainwater he sprinkled it in front of him, and that thin blue steel sword within the rain-listening pavilion followed this motion. Suddenly it began to hum vibrating, like a real dragon about to break through the clouds, dauntlessly and unstoppably dashing forward!

Soybean-sized raindrops fell onto the limestone tiles, making a light pa pa sound; new branches torn off by the wind made a light pa pa sound; within the rain-listening pavilion made a light pa pa sound, and those ironwood prayer beads enveloping the blue steel sword were split, broken in all directions!

The ascetic monk bitterly smiled and closed both eyes – the blue steel sword howled passing through the hundred plus ironwood prayer beads in the air of the pavilion, deeply stabbing into the center of his dark brow. Blood slowly oozed out, and the bitter smile froze as thus.

Beyond Chao Mansion's gate, Ning Que saw the enemies not far away, slowly pulling out his blade from a Tang soldier's chest.

Dadadada, the broken prayer beads struck onto the beads, onto the walls, then fell onto the wooden boards.

The elite Tang troops still living saw the slight smile of the middle-aged man sitting cross-legged in the pounding rain, saw the mysterious masked youth holding a blade and standing in the pounding rain, and their hearts were full of the feeling of despair.

From an alley came the sound of a carriage.

Chao XiaoShu's brow slowly went upwards.

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ChangAn's South City. Lord Meng's most money-earning Star-Reaching Gambling House had already turned into a pile of ruins. The gambling equipment smashed to bits were all over the street; chips ordinarily representing silver coins were soaked inside filthy, rank rainwater, no one daring to go out and get them. Along the road, women and children surrounding more than ten gambling house guards with their legs beaten till broken cried and screamed without stopping, but not one person dared to use words to curse at those damnable assailants, not even daring to have hateful expressions.

A crowd of forty with black clothes, black pants and black boots stood indifferently in the four directions. They were there to maintain order, and at the same time to declare to everyone in South City that they had entered. At the very front of the crowd, Qi the Fourth received a blue-colored handkerchief from a subordinate, wiping blood from his mouth. On his face there was no appearance of pride or arrogance, instead it appeared to have a bit of disturbed anxiousness, because he knew that even though the Fish Dragon Gang had taken the advantage tonight and invaded many territories, but he knew that in this moment, Big Brother at Spring Wind Pavilion was alone facing the ambush of those powerful enemies – at his side there was no one else.

The same story with similar scenery, tonight in ChangAn City, every place within the city this was happening constantly. The pawnshop and brothel that Uncle Cat controlled were smashed by a group of swift and fierce black-clothed men, and yet another group of black-clothed men

controlled Jun JieYang's three extra homes, then directly smashed those three luxurious little courtyards flat.

The spring rain-like cold strands of harpstrings constantly came down with a pitter-patter, as well as a gradually growing sign, that tonight in ChangAn's underworld, all the big powers holding onto the government, this tiger's skin, all poured into East City in response to launch an attack against Spring Wind Pavilion's Old Chao who had led ChangAn's JiangHu for many years. And no one had thought that that legendary person of the underworld would actually use himself as bait, taking advantage of South City and West City deploying forces as an opportunity of empty bases, sending out all the brothers in the gang to control everything.

After tonight, as long as Spring Wind Pavilion's Old Chao was still living, then he and his brothers could then completely control all of the Night Scene in ChangAn City in their grasp, but..... Chao XiaoShu of tonight only had a single person, those brothers who had followed him for many bloody years weren't there. Could he still live through it?

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ChangAn's North City, the heavily guarded Yu Lin Army's encampment, the deputy general of the Yu Lin Army Cao Ning looked at two junior officers with their hands tied in front of him, and then with a bitter smile said, "Chang SiWei? Should I address you as Chang Third? Fei JingWei, should I call you Fei Sixth? Truly I hadn't thought that in my Yu Lin Army, there would actually be two members of the Fish Dragon Gang."

Chang SiWei was a middle-aged man of mild temperament. Towards his superior with a slight smile he said, "Do you truly not know or falsely not know? Very many people in the army camp earn money outside it. As far

as I know, General, you also have done a share from Lord Meng's and Uncle Cat's side."

Fei JingWei stayed silent, only coldly staring at Cao Ning's face as though he wanted to beat some blossoms into this old face.

Cao Ning picked up a teacup and drank two sips, saying, "What was the point of saying these things now? It was just some energy used on words for an argument. The two of you are just tiny little captains. If they weren't seen by Spring Wind Pavilion, why would I have to say these useless words to you? But don't think that because you rely on Spring Wind Pavilion's backing, that you could be pretentious in front of me, the general. I, the general, only need one order that you two cannot leave the camp. As long as you two dare to leave the camp, I, the general can behead you without asking for an Imperial Order, and if you two don't leave the camp, Spring Wind Pavilion will be forced to death tonight."

"Spring Wind Pavilion is dead for sure." He slowly got the next teacup, and indifferently said, "That's why you guys have no use."

Chang SiWei slightly smiling said, "In this world, very many people died, but my big brother won't die."

"This world has never had someone that can't be killed." Cao Ning stared with his face and in a cold voice said, "My Great Tang Dynasty has so many nobles that want to reward Spring Wind Pavilion's face, but he didn't want it. I also want to see, with so many nobles wanting him dead as such a miniscule person in ChangAn's JiangHu, how he can still overturn it!"

His tone had sounded out, and the entry curtain was lifted open, and the cold night wind enveloping several rain drops floated inside. Cao Ning slightly paused, about to angrily reprimand, then subconsciously standing up and cupping his hands in salute he said, "Old Sir Lin..... it's so late, why would you come here? You..... this is?"

Old Sir Lin with a short and stumpy stature looked at him with a face full of smiles, and said, "Not something different, just that today at the Palace's Forbidden Gate, I heard that at night the Yu Lin Army has raised alertness levels. I came over to ask what exactly happened."

Afterwards Old Sir Lin turned around looking towards the two military officers with their hands tied, and frowning he asked, "How did this happen again?"

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Within the army camp's brave rider formation, torches illuminated the horse yard, and the continuous vertical rain had no way of snuffing them out. The deputy commander of the brave rider formation Chu Ren angrily glared at a man with a square-face atop a horse, roaring he said, "Liu Si you damn bastard! Sealing the camp is a military order from the army department! If you dare to rush out the camp, then I'll dare to behead you!"

The square-faced man's stature was exceedingly tall and sturdy. Even though he was sitting on a steed, it was as if a pair of legs also almost hung down to the ground. Hearing the deputy commander's rebuke, his face as before was still expressionless, his right hand slowly stroked the iron spear on the saddle's side; his gaze penetrated through the night rain watching somewhere in ChangAn's East City called Spring Wind

Pavilion.

He was called Liu Si, ranked number five in the Fish Dragon Gang. In those years Spring Wind Pavilion's Old Chao depended on a stiff sword by his side forcefully fighting for a slice of the JiangHu in in ChangAn City, it was exactly this person that followed closely behind and stood by Chao XiaoShu's side, and this night he had no way of standing at Big Brother's side blocking arrows for him, and could only silently hope that the young fellow that Big Brother selected could manage the matter well.

Liu Si looked back towards Deputy Commander Chu Ren at the army camp's entrance, looked at those dense and numerous army soldiers, and without an expression he said, "Commander, I, a lowly officer, don't dare to defy the military order of breaking out of camp, but after ten years ago when you personally tore away the promotion order, I always very much wanted to fight with you, I don't know whether you dare to or not."

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Somewhere inside of the Imperial Palace in a remote and quiet room, a sound a voice carrying a heavy HeBei accent, "Old Chen, you are an elder of the Imperial Bodyguard. Although in your younger years you had already left office, but you served a day as an Grand Inner Imperial Guard, then you are an Grand Inner Imperial Guard for life. You are the Emperor's face, where should we join in this kind of JiangHu quarrel? I know that the friendship between you and Old Chao is good, but tonight on this matter you should be very clear whose grandfather's plan it was, who dares to go hinder it?"

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In the middle of the rain, that carriage slowly stopped. The distance from Spring Wind Pavilion Chao's residence was only 100 feet apart.

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Chapter 60: The Running Young Archer

Neither close nor far, only a hundred feet away – to ordinary people, this number didn't have any other meaning, but this distance in fact represented danger and even death. Because no matter whether it was a Sword Master, a Talisman Master or an Enchanter, as long as they stepped into the Mysterious Cavern realm, then they could within 100 feet launch an attack at will.

The boundless spring rain fell splashing on top of that horse carriage, fell onto that tall and sturdy coachman atop the carriage coachman's seat. The curtain of the carriage occasionally being lifted up by the wind, only being able to see a corner of a simple long gown, but unable to see the person inside clearly. The owner of the simple clothes was an old person with plain facial features, his brow anxiously drooping, and his face riddled with wrinkles, just like an old root of goldthread, rough and bitter.

He was called Xiao KuYu, the power supporting the Great Tang nation's military. Twenty years ago he already entered the Mysterious Cavern realm. A few days ago, because of tonight's planned purge, he was secretly recalled back to the capitol by secret military order from Yang Pass.

Outside of the carriage was miserable with the cold wind and bitter rain, but inside of the carriage Xiao KuYu felt indifferent. The two thin, dried up hands placed on his knees slightly trembled, his thumb from his index and middle finger moving unceasingly pinching on the four horizontal lines, just like a withered branch unceasingly tapping onto dry yellow earth. Both his eyes were closed, facing him was the thick carriage's curtain, but with just a light pinch of the fingers, he could precisely see

the entrance of the main gate of the Chao residence, and see Chao XiaoShu sitting cross-legged in the pounding rain.

The raindrops in the direction of the side street of Spring Wind Pavilion were impacted by some kind of formless force. At first they became more blatantly slanted, such that no one could see or even sense the fluctuations, beginning to condense the energies of heaven and earth.

Sitting in the pounding rain, Chao XiaoShu's lip slightly pursed. Tonight up to this point, the middle-aged man's slightly pale handsome looks for the first time appeared with a heavy, serious expression. Towards that Enchanter in that mysterious carriage, he had to concentrate all of his psyche to deal with, so his eyes slightly lowered, no longer looking at those ten plus despairing elite Tang troops in front of him. His right hand showing beyond his sleeve whizzed, thumping into the accumulated water at his side, splashing up the muddy colored rainwater.

With his palm heavily smashing into the rainwater, within the rain-listening pavilion, the deeply embedded single, thin, blue steel sword in the ascetic monk's head swiftly returned with a chi sound. In the rainy sky it spun about like a flash of lightning with a shrill whistle, a never before seen speed transformed into flowing light, instantly flying above the courtyard walls, piercing towards that carriage in the rain.

Calmly within the carriage in the rain sounded one indifferent word: "Tsk."

The blue steel sword flowed like a rainbow, struck into the seeming power that this word held. In the rainy sky of threads of rain, seemingly being restricted by fluctuations of formless power, just a moment ago it was soaring over the courtyard walls, now it suddenly stopped. Then like

a broken string on a kite, it flew miserably tilting, crashing into the wall of the opposite side of the street, following the rain and falling to the ground!

In the carriage in the rain, that one sound of 'tsk' from 100 feet away, seemed to have already transcended the categories of space and time, but at the same time in the Sea of Qi in Chao XiaoShu's ears, it was echoing like thunder in his ear drums.

Boom! Boom! Boom! Boom!

Chao XiaoShu felt his own heart seemingly being held by a formless hand, beginning to violently beat like war drums incessantly thumping, instantly losing control of the flying sword. He knew that if he didn't manage another response, the next time, this war drum would then heavily thump till it split, and his own heart would then be crushed to bits by the person in the carriage.

The person in that carriage – just where did they find such a great Enchanter?

Chao XiaoShu's thin lips tightly pursed, lifting his right hand like a flash of lightning, and smacked his own chest three times, pa pa and the rain water smacked out of his blue robe. He forcefully sealed his own Sea of Qi, but his body was already using those previous strikes floating tilted apart from the ground, floating out of the gate of his own courtyard, floating to the alley shrouded by rainwater.

Two palms heavily beat the ground – Chao XiaoShu sensed fluctuations of energy in the air that left no place untouched, sensed that dark cold

energy threads were making a net all about his body. Taking in a deep breath, he lifted his step and walked forward.

He went towards that carriage in the rain, his complexion becoming more and more pale, but his two eyes became brighter and brighter. On an ordinary day, they were calm and unhurried, by now they had long been replaced with cold determination – even though with each step, the fluctuating energies in the alley would cause his body massive injury, he would still walk with another step. In the carriage, that powerful Enchanter that had pierced his Sea of Qi would make it still sharper, but he still persisted to walk forward, because he had to get close to that carriage.

Just in the instant that Chao XiaoShu's heart in his chest began to violently beat, Ning Que also felt the same. In the crashing rain, he heard that thumping like a war drum – he knew that horrifying sound came from within Chao XiaoShu's body, because that Enchanter controlling the energies of heaven and earth directly attacked the internal organs of his enemies!

This kind of move appeared to be the type that was impossible to defend against. He, standing in the rain, his body began to stiffen. His hands grasping the blade's handle suddenly felt extremely cold. He knew that the truly terrifying enemy finally arrived.

Chao XiaoShu went towards that carriage in the rain, and didn't give Ning Que any kind of explanation, because his psyche was completely focused on confronting the enemy within the carriage. He didn't have any spare concentration to tell Ning Que because he had done this.

Ning Que had seen Lu QingChen in action before, he knew what a

terrifying existence an Enchanter was, so he knew that in this instant and moment he must suppress all the fear in his heart. He was very clear that before a powerful Enchanter, resisting with a weaker body was a weak point of them all. If he wanted Chao XiaoShu to live, and wanted himself to live, then he must have a way that used all of his thinking to harm that person's body within the car, and wreck their opponent's body.

The Chao Residence's main gate and the dividing heavy rain curtain in between from the carriage was a distance of 100 feet. A Great Enchanter could control the energies of heaven and earth and ignore this short distance, ignore any restrictions of time and space and directly attack the enemy, and he was just an ordinary person. What means could he use to attack the opponent's meditation?

His right foot heavily stomped onto the limestone tiles, his sole bursting up a ring of slightly muddy accumulated water. Relying on the massive countershock force, Ning Que's body resembled the leaves swirling from violent winds – with a whooshing sound, he forcefully flew out horizontally of Chao Mansion's main gate, leaping into mid-air.

Once he was in mid-air, with a zeng, his right hand carrying his blade precisely stabbed back into the sheath behind him. Then gripping a feathered arrow from his quiver, his left elbow turned, and a yellow hardwood poplar bow rotated in the rain and appeared in front of him.

He floated through the rain, fiercely pulling that yellow hardwood poplar bow. His muscles flexed tightly and then released, and the bowstring fired a volley of four feathered arrows!

Four arrows like lightning shot towards that carriage in the rain!

Ning Que's two feet stepped into the water, the center of his body falling onto the ground. Those four arrows had already passed Chao XiaoShu's side – one could imagine his reaction speed and firing speed were truly astonishing!

Since the requirement was speed, then there was no reason to stop. Only seeing Ning Que's two feet stepping into the street full of rainwater, his body was leaning forward like a leopard, rushing violently towards that carriage. The yellow hardwood poplar bow again spread out in front of him, the bowstring making humming sounds, with feathered arrows firing out like lightning again!

He charged in the rainy night, he fired arrows as he charged.

Chapter 61: Millions Of Raindrops Falling From The Sky

In the blink of an eye, in the air around the carriage in the rain at Chao Mansion's main gate, there were fourteen feathered arrows like lightning. These feathered arrows flew past Chao XiaoShu's side, piercing through the densely packed raindrops, and strangely avoiding the tall and sturdy coachman's interception at the coachman's seat. Then the fourteen arrows whistled shooting through the carriage's curtain into the hollow compartment.

Inside of the carriage, Xiao KuYu frowned, his already extremely distressed ancient appearance now seemed even more haggard. Staring at the empty space in front of him, the seemingly boundlessly endless Enchanter power in his body filled the carriage, unexpectedly making the inside of the compartment fill with a light scent of orchids; in the bit of air like orchids was a very strange scene.

The lightning-like arrows outside of the carriage, once they came forward to this old and powerful body, it was as though they entered a relatively still space, instantly losing all of their speed and becoming like a still, dead object!

Fourteen feathered arrows were unexpectedly strangely still, floating in the air – not one was able to touch the plain clothing on his body. One of the feathered arrows floating in the air inside of the carriage was less than three inches away from Xiao KuYu's brow – two arrows were immobile in front of him, and even more feathered arrows were suspended motionless in front of his hands!

The still arrows fell to the ground as light as feathers, just like the

rainwater outside of the carriage, and even more like tender, soft leaves struck down by rainwater. If they were even sharper arrows, once the speed bestowed by the yellow hardwood poplar bow and the wound tendon bowstring was lost, they then lost all of their lethality, and like trash, they fell down at Xiao KuYu's feet.

But because of responding to the fourteen lightning-like arrows, even Xiao KuYu who was powerful within the military, had his psyche unavoidably affected a bit. The Enchanting power controlling the energies of heaven and earth all around showed a slight gap.

To a person like Chao XiaoShu, any gap of the enemy was his chance. He felt the layers of binding on his heart loosen some, the tens of thousands of prickling pains on his Sea of Qi weakened a bit. Only visible was him clearly yelling; his blue robe flapped the rain, and his rolled sleeve flew – his whole body becoming like a fallen leaf, floating towards the carriage!

That tall and sturdy driver on the coachmen seat hollered, and that whip made of some unknown material suddenly lashed out. Within the rough clothing, was an extremely dark-earthly yellow light that was at first hidden – very clearly he was a warrior.

At the side of an old and ailing Great Enchanter in a frightening realm, inevitably he would have a powerful, fierce bodyguard. Even Ning Que was able to think of this, Chao XiaoShu naturally wouldn't miscalculate.

One whip strike lashed out, and wind and rain parted. The completely wet robe on Chao XiaoShu was blasted by a strong wind making whooshing sounds, but now his body had already become like a fallen leaf, and extremely softly and easily he evaded. His right hand's index and

middle finger directed the sword in the air, the sword stabbing towards the close-quarters guarding coachman. With his fingertips forward, within the chaotically blown raindrops appeared a single white line.

The coachman again yelled, and the returning whip drew a circle in the air that smashed it to bits, waiting to again brandish the whip for when Chao XiaoShu came, but he was interrupted by violent pain in his belly.

His widened eyes looked downwards, only seeing an ordinary plain blade, deeply imbedded into his stomach!

In the rain, Ning Que who had the whole while been madly rushing, clearly knew that the Great Enchanter inside of the carriage and the coachman atop the driving seat were both practitioners, but his steps didn't have the slightest hesitation; just that he was just a little later than Chao XiaoShu in getting to the carriage. Then in the very first turn, he made his way under the two steeds, avoiding that close-quarters guard's gaze, discarding the arrows and drawing the blade.

When he was underneath the horses' bellies, his right hand tightly held onto the blade, but it was from the rear of the horses' hips, from the carriage's shaft slantingly piercing upwards that this sinister blade's strike precisely avoided the enemy's possible soft armor, deeply stabbing into the other's belly!

The blade entering the belly wasn't a fatal wound. Ning Que with his face expressionless flipped his wrist, the blade twist and turned, and instantly the innards of the carriage driver's belly into a mess of paste.

The driver seeing those non-stop twisting motions of the blade in his

belly, his face had an expression of appalled despair, his throat making gurgling sounds. The metallic blade rinsed by rainwater many times was an ice-cold piece, but he felt it was incomparably burning.

Ning Que at the moment wasn't in the mood to enjoy the dying expression of his opponent. With his palm resting on the cart shaft, he agilely flipped up, charging from the close-quarters bodyguard's side over with Chao XiaoShu's figure closely following charging to kill into that mysterious carriage.

The carriage's curtain rose, and the cold and bitter spring rain went inside.

Chao XiaoShu's face was pale, his eyes bright. One wave of his hand parried Xiao KuYu's direct attack with a cane.

Xiao KuYu's expression suddenly changed, gathering all of his Enchanting power, he wanted to directly shoot this troublesome JiangHu person to death.

Ning Que went through in between Chao XiaoShu's knees. With a muffled groan he suddenly knelt down, and the sharp blade in his hand firmly pierced through the bottom of Xiao KuYu's foot.

Xiao KuYu howled painfully like an old animal about to die. Because of the massive pain in the bottom of his feet, his meditation was again interrupted, but his two old palms like dried up twigs already fanned open, about to strike!

Without any expression, Chao XiaoShu ruthlessly crashed into the old man’s chest. The one crash, scattered all of the opponents condensed enchanting power – turning his hand over he pulled out a dagger from his own boot, and ruthlessly stabbed it into his opponent’s neck!

Pu!

One stab.

Two stabs.

Three stabs.

Fourteen stabs.

Chao XiaoShu knelt at Xiao KuYu’s gaunt body, his left hand pressing rock-hard against his right shoulder, his right hand holding a sharp dagger stabbing without stopping. His face didn’t have a shred of emotion, blood sprayed onto his blue robes, changing them into vague, dark red-colored flowers.

Until finally the old man’s neck was attached by only a thin layer of flesh, such that even if Lord Clear Sky would have no way to revive him, did he then put away the dagger in his hand, slowly standing up inside of the carriage.

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The other carriage in the alley had the whole while not moved, the whole while quietly stopped in the boundless spring rain. Whether it was the very beginning of the slaughter, the bitter battle inside of Chao Mansion, or even that core-shocking beheading of the Enchanter in the alley, none made the slightly fat youngster in the carriage move. He just quietly looked at his own finger like lotus roots, as though entranced.

In the cultivating world, there were several publicly recognized rules. An Enchanter in the same realm could sweep a Sword Master or Talisman Master of the same realm, just like at North Mountain Crossing Elder Lu QingChen could safely overwhelm that expelled disciple from the Academy, but the final result of this battle was a bit surprising.

“Both were top levels within the Mysterious Cavern realm, a Great Swordmaster was actually able to kill an Enchanter, truly making people quite not understand. But Chao XiaoShu you were truly amazing. In a battle between cultivators, unexpectedly you won forcibly striking out a wide and rich scent of metal and blood.”

Despite the slightly fat young person being young, he was already consecrated by the Prince’s Mansion. In his heart he silently praised and lamented Chao XiaoShu’s fierce liveliness, but in his eyes there was still the free and uncaring overtone. Before he disdained to get involved, but he believed that as long as he acted, no matter how strong Chao XiaoShu and that other fellow that he hadn’t seen were, there was only a road to death.

Because he was.... Wang JingLue, unrivaled under Fateseekers.

“Let’s go, let me send this legend of ChangAn’s underworld on his last journey.”

Wang JingLue calmly rubbed his smooth, fat, soft finger, and spoke with a slight laugh. His words were full of strong confidence, and even a bit of undisguised excitement. Each time before killing someone truly powerful, he was always very excited.

The carriage didn't move, and no one replied to his order. Wang JingLue slightly frowned. He stretched his wide forehead, making several difficult to discern lines, and squinted his eyes. Separated by the thick carriage curtain, he sensed all the fluctuations of energy around the carriage, but couldn't discover anything unusual, and didn't notice that someone was spying.

Inside and outside of the carriage was a deathly stillness. Only the pitter patter sound of rain accompanied. This young power known as peerless under the Fateseeker realm, in his heart birthed intense alarm, but felt that this kind of alarm had no cause. He calmly sat inside of the carriage, and was silent for a long time, listening to the sound of rain outside of the carriage, then suddenly stretched out his hand tearing off the heavy curtain of the carriage.

The corner of the carriage's curtain rose, and suddenly that piece of curtain drifted out lightly floating, floating five feet away, then falling lightly floating onto the ground.

Wang JingLue squinted his eyes watching that curtain corner in the distant rain. His right finger slightly shot out, and the carriage's curtain in front of him again swept up – then without the slightest incidence it again split, turning into a piece of cloth in the rainwater.

It seemed that near the carriage was an invisible blade.

There was no sensation of any other cultivator's fluctuations of Enchanting power, only that within the energies of heaven and earth around the curtain were being sliced apart instantly with a few extremely subtle changes. If he wasn't a powerhouse within the Tang Dynasty's younger generation, perhaps even those slight changes in the energies of heaven and earth would be impossible to detect.

Thinking of some possibilities, Wang JingLue's face became slightly paler.

After a while, in the end arrogance prevailed over this unknown fear. With a muffled yell, the ten fingers of his chubby hands burst open like a white-lily with excessive nourishment, and powerful fluctuations instantly invaded from inside the carriage to the outside, jolting all the carriages windows and doors open. Immediately he clearly recited enchantments, wanting to swoop out of the carriage.

Then in the next instant his body extremely pathetically stopped, becoming like a stone carving in the rain.

The whole alley had already turned into another world. His action of trying to break through the envelopment directly led to a dangerous state within the energies of heaven and earth. The accumulated rainwater on the limestone tiles on the ground began to violently tremble; from time to time, leaping in the sky and then falling, just like the wild dance of men and women during the Spring Festival of the Da He Kingdom!

And the night sky above the alley turned into a magical workshop of

Lord Hao Tian – all of the falling raindrops from the night sky, all turned into irresistibly sharp little blades!

Countless raindrops turned into countless irresistibly sharp blades, falling from the night sky, falling onto the carriage in the alley, falling onto the planks of the compartment. The planks shattered into tiny pieces; falling onto the carriage shaft – the shaft turned into wood dust; falling onto the two horses in front of the shaft, the horses cried like they had never cried before and instantly were sliced into meat paste by the raindrops!

Tens of thousands of spring raindrops fell into the alley, and everything in the rain around the carriage was smashed and splintered into bits. Very strange was that the rain that fell onto the carriage were truly as soft as spring rain, falling onto Wang JingLue's pale cheeks, without leaving a single scratch.

Amidst the rain, Wang JingJue looked strangely pathetic, miserably sitting on the barely surviving board of the carriage. The clothing on his body had long been soaked, and his almost net-like hair hung weakly onto his forehead. He raised his head a bit disappointedly towards the falling rain of the night sky, and his body began to uncontrollably violently shake, unknowably from the cause of cold or fear.

With difficulty he lowered his head towards the four alleys around him in the night scene, watching the dancing rain on the ground of the alley, seeing that four alleys and the rainwater formed a faint "Water well" (井) character. His pale lips slightly trembled, muttering to himself he said, "Water well character?"

The rainwater dripped down from the wet hair on his forehead – Wang

JingLue in absolute fear turned his head, searching for a trace of an enemy in the rainy night. His ordinary arrogance had long turned into despair and dread; he suddenly coughed violently, leaned over, and using his hand to heavily slap the rain at his side, he cried like a small child being bullied, saying, "Impossible! Why would there be a Rune Master!

Who drew this rune!"

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Chapter 62: When Killing People As Though Hoeing A Field, Don'T Show Strain

At age four he had his First Vision, by age six he could enter Sensation, by eleven he was further at Doubtless, by sixteen he had entered Mysterious Cavern, and within ten years he rose from the bottom of the Mysterious Cavern level to the pinnacle of the Mysterious Cavern level, and with consecutive victories, he defeated everyone underneath the Fateseeker level as an unrivaled number one. No matter how it was looked at, the Tang Dynasty spokesperson declared that Wang JingLue was a cultivating genius.

But Wang JingLue was very clear, without having ever met those men and women when they unknowably and occasionally come out, his own reputation as a genius was insubstantial.

Thus he even more hoped that others would say he was a steady, seasoned cultivator, and didn't want the common people to praise him as a young genius of cultivation. He wanted to have an especially contrasting bearing of a profoundly deep cultivator, so even if he was very young, and his body was also very healthy without any kind of illness, but he would always cough twice occasionally.

But sitting amidst the spring rain dejectedly, he truly coughed, because fear and frustration made him choke on the rainwater. With a pale face he looked at the gradually emerging silhouette of a tall and thin Daoist, and the trembling of his body became even more intense.

Walking out of the alley was a tall and thin old man wearing a dirty Daoist robe. On the robe was an unknowable amount of oil stains and

dirt, and the look on his face with triangular eyes twinkled, seemingly with an exceptionally obscene vulgarity, without any appearance on the outside of a skilled person.

"I spent half the day drawing this Daoist rune, what do you think of it?"

The tall and thin Daoist parted the layers of the rain curtain, earnestly asking the collapsed Wang JingLue in the alley. At his feet, the fat middle-aged man from the Prince's Mansion had already turned into a corpse, the clothing on his body and even the skin underneath the clothing, was just like layer after layer of paint cracking off for several years bit by bit, appearing exceedingly horrifying.

Wang JingLue smiled wretchedly, and to that tall and thin Daoist, crestfallen he said, "My Tang Dynasty only has ten and some great Daoist Rune experts. To be willing to wear Daoist robes naturally is one of the Clear Sky Way's Four Rune Masters."

"This rune that necessitated no less than this elderly Rune Master to draw for half a day with the street as the base, and with the rainwater as the ink, this rune in the street was naturally terrifying.....only that I don't understand why Elder didn't directly kill me."

That Clear Sky South Gate's Rune Master slightly frowned, waving his hand in the air he drew one word, driving away that annoying spring rain about his body. Shaking his head he said, "The monk from Yue Lun Kingdom, the swordsman from South Jin, the old man from the military, if these people died then they died, but you are not the same. I was ordered to not let you act, for the sake of protecting you."

“Wang JingLue, you at a young age are already standing at the threshold of the Fateseeker realm, truly rare. I have heard the Academy pass out some information that the State Masters and the Emperor’s younger brother have commented on you before, believing that forty years from now you could reach the layer above the Five Boundaries.....for my Tang Dynasty to produce a young genius isn’t easy, so you must work as hard as possible to improve for forty years!”

Wang JingLue’s expression changed without stopping.

“You don’t need to return to the Prince’s Mansion, go to the front lines and serve for three years to atone.”

After saying this, the Rune Master turned and walked towards a hidden, dark alley, muttering, “Old Chao of Spring Wind Pavilion, he isn’t some kind of small dog or cat. If he is so good to kill, could it be that tens of years ago I couldn’t have killed him?”

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The blue sleeves gently flapped, the thin blue steel flew humming through the falling rain, returning into Chao XiaoShu’s hand.

He turned his head and glanced at Ning Que standing behind him, confirming that besides a little blood on his mouth, the youth hadn’t suffered any kind of serious injury. Nodding his head he put the sword back in the sheath, left that carriage, and walked into the alley towards the street.

Walking to the intersection across from Spring Wind Pavilion, Chao XiaoShu stopped his steps, looking at the spot behind the rain curtain. Ning Que raised his arm to wipe the rain from his forehead, then his gaze looked over. After a very long silence, he asked, "You're still waiting for someone?"

"Mmh." Chao XiaoShu put his hand onto the sword hilt, and replied, "A person called Wang JingLue, but it seems that he won't come."

Ning Que frowned, passing the blade from his right hand to his left hand, and asked, "Why?"

Chao XiaoShu turned his head and looked at the black mask on Ning Que's face, and with a slight smile he said, "For my Tang Dynasty to produce a cultivating genius is not easy, perhaps some people don't want to see him die at our hands."

"I don't have your kind of confidence." Ning Que thought back to tonight's repeated battles. Thinking of those powerful cultivators, and thought that if he didn't have Chao XiaoShu in front, he would've died long ago. Quickly he said, "If you have that last card to play, why didn't he come out earlier, and chose to let you fight through death for life?"

"When I arrived at 47th Street, I explained to you before, when that card is suddenly shown, then no one would dare to move in the whole of ChangAn City. Then there would be no way to know to know how many cards those nobles have, as well as their thoughts."

Chao XiaoShu suddenly opened his mouth and spoke, "Come with me on a stroll?"

Ning Que raised his right arm, using his sleeve to wipe the rain and blood, sticking back the blade into the sheath on his back, and nodded.

The rain was a bit lighter than before, with the pattering trickle falling all around the streets of Spring Wind Pavilion.

Chao XiaoShu's hand left the sword hilt, folding it behind his back. Strolling on the calm streets, his blue robes were as straight as before, his expression still calm – only that his complexion was paler by several degrees than before the battles. Besides only this, there seemed to be no other changes.

Ning Que followed behind him, walking as he tore clothing to stem the wound on his left arm. Even though that wound was shallow and thin, but for him who came from Min Mountain, he was accustomed to saving every drop of blood or strength.

In the rainy streets, the two of them went around the four directions around Spring Wind Pavilion. The two of them were just like a lion brother and tiger younger brother pair that after going through a bloody battle, started to tour their own territory.

Coming back to Chao Mansion's main entrance, Chao XiaoShu's expression appeared to be slightly exhausted. He rubbed his eyes, lifting the overlap of his blue robes back and forth, and just like this he sat on the wet stony steps.

Several remnants of the Tang troops loudly yelled and charged over at him.

Ning Que flipped his hand and pulled out the blade from his back, stepping in front he cut down; each flash of the blade would cut down one of his enemies, and each of the Tang soldiers that charged to the front of the streets fell like lumber one after the other in front of the street. At the same time his lips incessantly chanting he murmured, "One floats in the JiangHu, how could you not suffer from the blade? In one strike I'll kill you, in two strikes I'll kill you....."

Chao XiaoShu sat on the wet stony steps, exhaustingly using his sword to prop his body up. Seeing the scene in front of him, the shine in his eyes become more and more concentrated. He had long seen through that Ning Que's blade techniques carried a shadow of the army-type blade techniques, but exquisitely picking even more directions for opportunities to attack – only through moments of life and death could he realize these principles.

Ning Que's blade movements were so steady that they were dull, but once in awhile he would use strange swift movements like a raindrop, all along maintaining one principle – and that was to save the most energy when using the blade, but the blade always fell on his opponents' weakest parts.

"This is truly a man-slaying blade style."

Chao XiaoShu watched each flash of the blade. Thinking of those scenes during the battle, Ning Que demonstrated massive determination as well as excellent judging abilities. Thinking again of his true age, he couldn't help but to silently lament in his heart, "It's too bad this little fellow has no way of cultivating, or else in the future of the Tang Empire, inevitably he would hold a very important position."

Seeing the bodies like rotten wood being soaked by the rain, seeing the youth carrying his plain blade while gasping for breath, Chao XiaoShu lightly smiled and said, "Can't you be a little more poetic when you kill people? When you kill people it's like you're hoeing a field."

Ning Que turned around, raising his blade covered in blood to his shoulders. He looked at the middle-aged man atop the stony steps, pointed at night rain falling from the sky, and breathlessly he said, "It's been constantly wet, as for hoeing fields.....where could you cut down people and be this tired?"

Chapter 63: Two Bowls Of Fried Egg And Noodles

Arriving at Forty Seventh Street in the deep night, the door of the Old Brush House was pushed open by someone, then quickly closed. Inside the dim light like stars flashed once and then was again extinguished.

Ning Que took off the heavy weapons from his back, ripping off the covering cloth of the big black umbrella, then removed the heavily drenched outer shirt, handing it over to Sang Sang standing in front of him, and normally he asked, "Hungry, are the noodles cooked yet?"

Sang Sang gave the dry towel in her hands to him, and heavily nodding her head, she happily said, "I'll bring it over for you."

A bowl of steaming hot noodle soup was carried over, still with four hot peppers, and chopped onions but a lot more than usual. Spread out on top of the noodles were two golden yellow white eggs that were even more rare. Cutting people down was indeed more tiring than hoeing fields – Ning Que this time was soaked all over, and within his stomach was even more hungry grumbling. How could he resist the temptation of extra green onions and eggs? Immediately in a glance, putting down the slightly wet towel, he picked up chopsticks, and rapidly he ate it in big bites, seemingly extremely sweetly.

Sang Sang happily watched him eating, on her little face's dark cheeks was a happy expression. Picking up that slightly wet towel, standing behind him she began to wipe his hair; from time to time, reminding that if it's too hot to not eat too fast.

At this time, inside of the dim shop echoed with the sounds of two

coughs. All along no one paying him heed, it seemed that the usually invisible ChangAn City Boss, watched this pair of master and servant chatting as though they didn't see him, and finally he couldn't help but to speak up, "The noodles are very fragrant."

A few hours ago, when Chao XiaoShu came to the Old Brush House the first thing he said were also these words.

Sang Sang continued to rub Ning Que's hair, acting as though she hadn't seen anyone, and hadn't heard these words. But Ning Que's reaction earlier was a bit different, with his head low eating noodle soup he indistinctly said, "Also give him a bowl."

With a little work, a second bowl of soup noodles was brought over, and Chao XiaoShu glanced in the four directions, and discovered that besides a circular chair, there was nothing else to sit on. But he didn't care, and just at Ning Que's side he squatted down, holding chopsticks and eating several bites, but discovered that his own noodles seemed to be a bit unlike the noodles in Ning Que's bowl.

The standard four peppers, thirty sliced green onions, but no fried eggs.

He couldn't help but to use his chopsticks to lightly tap on Ning Que's bowl's rim as a reminder. Ning Que used his peripheral vision, and nearly laughing out loud, he turned his head to Sang Sang and persuasively said, "Don't be so stingy, fry another egg."

The fried egg finally came, and Ning Que and Chao XiaoShu grasping the "sea" bowls like little pots happily ate noodles. Sang Sang squatted not far from the two people, putting that shirt into a copper basin and

roasting, and in the shop no one spoke.

Without knowing how much time had passed, Ning Que put down the bowl of noodles in his hand, and comfortably looked backward, rubbing his small drum of a belly. He looked at Chao XiaoShu squatting next to him and said, "I killed over five people. Give me a new amount.....don't be stingy, I even had Sang Sang fry an egg for you."

Chao XiaoShu carrying the noodle bowl looked at him and bitterly smiled, saying, "So here you've been waiting for me, two thousand two hundred."

"Deal." Ning Que seemed as though he did things as he pleased, but he was a little bit excited. As he was squatting next to Sang Sang roasting the shirt in the copper basin, he even more tightly held a little fist, secretly wondering just how big of a pile two thousand two hundred silver coins was.

Sang Sang was about to go wash dishes, and Chao XiaoShu reluctantly passed over a little less than half of the bowl of remaining noodle soup, then his brow slightly scrunched. Slowly lifting up his sleeves to cover up his lips, when he put down the sleeves, there were already more stains of blood.

Ning Que saw his sleeves, and knew that in the repeated battles before, this extremely powerful middle-aged man had after all still suffered heavy injuries. After a period of silence he asked, "Are you okay?"

Chao XiaoShu received a bowl of coarse tea that Sang Sang brought over. With a thanking slight smile, after drinking a gulp he calmly said,

"No need to worry. Since I was young I grew up in East City's poor streets. In this lifetime I don't know how many battles I've fought, and taken how many injuries worse than this one, each time fighting and seeing my whole body covered in blood, when thinking that I would ever be able to get up again, I always could get up and give them a mortal blow."

Ning Que mocking himself said, "A ruffian that only knows how to fight and brawl can unexpectedly cultivate, and so formidably. My heart is so fixed on the path of cultivation, but I can't even touch the first boundary. Lord Hao Tian is truly blind."

Chao XiaoShu smiled, and didn't continue this topic. The gang leader, immersed his whole life in the underworld of ChangAn City's JiangHu, in the end was able to become a Great Sword Master at the top level of the Mysterious Cavern realm. Within that, he had a few chances, but those chances weren't worth mentioning.

"You said before, after tonight your cards will be flipped over."

Ning Que's gaze went through the wooden door of the shop, falling onto a distant corner of the palace, and said, "Right now I can roughly guess that your card is the Palace. With such deep backing, no wonder you don't have to care about ChangAn's government's face."

"After tonight roughly the whole Empire's people will envy me, because behind me stands that kind of a person." Chao XiaoShu calmly said, "But no one will know what price I paid."

"Doing work in place of nobles, what does that need you to pay?" Ning Que asked.

Chao XiaoShu shed a smile, saying, "If these years I wasn't being bothered by vulgar things, if that person in the Palace occasionally gets an idea, I then have to handle countless trivial and small matters, or else I would've long already broken through Mysterious Cavern, and stepped into the Fateseeker realm."

"Just that?" Ning Que continued to question.

Chao XiaoShu unknowingly thought of something, falling into a long period of silence, his smile becoming a bit thin, and slowly he said, "It also needs you to pay in blood. Doing things requires attention to the overall situation, so sometimes you can't be happy. Because of needing to force out all of the opponent's cards, it needed me to bear it for several months, so that I couldn't even protect my own brothers."

Hearing these words, Ning Que's right hand slightly tightened, knowing that this was mentioning Xiao Hei, but he didn't take it, and didn't speak of the relationship between him and Xiao Hei. Lowering his head he asked, "How did your brother die?"

"My brother was called Zhuo Er. He was a spy. The Army had him concealed at my side, to have him investigate me to see if I had any collusions with the Yue Lun Kingdom. In fact, they only wanted to excuse to act against Spring Wind Pavilion, even perhaps directly framing me."

"But brothers are brothers after all, he told me everything about the inside story, and naturally wouldn't investigate me for the Army and even less, frame me as per military orders. And because he was a soldier of my Tang Dynasty, he also couldn't betray a secret of a department of the

same uniform, so these few months, he was pressed by both sides in extreme suffering."

Chao XiaoShu's eyes slightly dropped, and said, "Now thinking of it, even if it angered that person in the Palace, I should have told him the truth earlier, that sooner or later he will die. At the very least in that short amount of time it wouldn't be so painful."

Ning Que willingly asked, "But you still haven't said how he died."

"Spying is the most dangerous type of work. When he hadn't fallen to either side yet, at any moment he could possibly die, and once he decided to go with one side, he could even more likely hasten death. That day when he finally decided to tell me the Army's plan, the Army became aware of the results, and so they cleaned up, and he died at the property across from here."

Chao XiaoShu gazed toward the shop's wooden door, gazing towards that gray wall that couldn't be seen.

After a period of silence, Ning Que asked, "The one who did it was that swordsman from South Jin from earlier?"

"Yes." Chao XiaoShu turned back and looked at the youth's young face. With a slight smile he said, "From now on we are brothers."

Ning Que's brow slightly jumped, smiling he replied, "Isn't this a bit too careless?"

Chao XiaoShu smiled and stood up, then said, "One whole life, two brothers. This kind of thing has always been that simple."

"One whole life, isn't more than two bowls of fried egg and noodles."

Ning Que shook his head smiling and said, "This word 'brother' is a bit too common. Also I know of those famous brothers, if they weren't among those people that fortunately died first, then these brothers in the end will all become enemies. Tonight I just wanted to help you, and earn a bit of money. Can you not be so banal, looking for some other meaning from livelihood?"

Chao XiaoShu's brow slowly scrunched up, with great interest sizing up Ning Que. A bit unexpectedly hearing this kind of reply, he asked, "While you are so young, but the world in your eyes is so dark.....now I'm really curious about your past, in the future if you're interested in telling me, please remember you absolutely must call me. The tea is on me."

Ning Que responded saying, "I already don't want to remember those things, much less act as a storyteller for other people to listen."

Chao XiaoShu smiled saying, "Alright, then besides fried egg and noodles, what do you believe is the true meaning of life?"

"Life's meaning of course is career and love, or that is to say money and women. I know you feel that this sentence is very clever, and feel that I'm clever, but is it possible for you to not smile so enigmatically?"

Ning Que helplessly shook his head. In order to make this ChangAn City

big shot understand what is called meaning, his finger indicated to Sang Sang who barely walked past asking, "Do you think that one girl recruited into Red Sleeves is suitable to be your family's lady of the house?"

Sang Sang took her small hand and wiped it on her apron. Afterwards she knitted her eyebrows very seriously thinking for quite a while, only then cautiously and solemnly she said, "I think that the girl sitting on second seat of your left hand side stands out very well."

"That is Miss Lu Xue." Ning Que thought of that girl's soft waist. Smiling he questioned closely, "Why do you feel this girl is very suitable to act as my wife?"

Sang Sang opened her eyes, that pair of willow-leaf eyes, and seriously answered saying, "Make-up on her face is applied thinly and evenly. Her smile feels very clean with neat white teeth, looking at them I feel she is very healthy. And I have secretly looked at her waist and butt, in the future she should be very good for rearing children."

Ning Que turned his head, to look towards Chao XiaoShu proudly smiling.

Chao XiaoShu looked at the small dimple on his left cheek, staring blankly he thought, Everyday guarding a shop, and discussing with your own underage maid over which prostitute is suitable to bear children and is suitable to act as his own wife, could it be that this is life's meaning?

All of a sudden he began thinking of leaving the Old Brush House to rely on the small maid in front of the shop's doorway, thinking of after returning back to Old Brush House the two bowls of hot steaming fried

egg noodles, thinking of before when he was forgotten in a corner by himself, thinking that between this pair of master and servant the two naturally wouldn't let other people insert feelings, gradually he understood a little something. Smiling he said, "In the first place, the meaning of life is to keep on living."

Ning Que shook his head and smiled while saying, "Forget it, these words are too sour."

Chao XiaoShu looked at the youth's expression, and knew that he also didn't understand what he was saying, naturally he also couldn't bring into the open those things. Standing up to leave he walked to the doorway, turning his head he smiled saying, "I should go. Tomorrow night ChangAn City still has very many matters that need to be dealt with. Someone will come here tomorrow to give you silver, afterwards he will also take you to go to a place."

Once he heard the last few words of this sentence, a bit of an alert expression appeared on Ning Que's face. He didn't ask what kind of place, and rather directly asked about the core of the matter. "Is it possible to not go?"

Chao XiaoShu pushed open the store's wooden doors, and neatly and cleanly said, "Impossible."

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Chapter 64: The Imperial Study

Tonight, ChangAn City was definitely very lively. After experiencing a night of battle, Ning Que was very tired, but the blade flashes and blood in the night rain still made him a bit excited. Thinking of the scene of everything still happening in every street and market, guessing Chao XiaoShu's cards, speculating about where he had to go tomorrow, tossing and turning, he had no way of falling asleep.

Separated by a thin blanket, he kicked Sang Sang awake. Until these things ended, there was no way to know. Sang Sang saw his haggard expression yet he couldn't sleep, leaning his head to the side and thinking. Under his unlined shirt was a jar of strong wine, and the both of them drank together sitting up in the bed. Just as before, Sang Sang drank most of the wine into her belly, and Ning Que only drank a few sips of liquor for a hard victory, then finally drowsily went to sleep.

The next morning, the spring rain that had been lingering for many days suddenly stopped. The clear and elegant sun, bore through from behind the rain clouds without so much as a greeting. As the skies shone, little birds danced atop treetops. A carriage silently stopped in front of the Old Brush House's entrance, and from the carriage came a youngster that looked like a servant. Without even giving a greeting, directly pushing open the shop's closed wooden doors, he gazed at both the master and servant with a slightly raised chin, and coldly said, "Let's go."

This was probably the person Chao XiaoShu said would come to pick them up. Ning Que looked at that servant, noting this person's calm appearance but seeming to not reveal quite a bit of arrogance. From this person's Adam's apple to his stance, there was a bit of a difference that

could be seen from an ordinary person's – this fellow should be that little eunuch from the Palace.

Last night he learned that Chao XiaoShu's support and backing came from the Imperial Palace, and today a little eunuch came to pick him up. Ning Que naturally didn't feel too shocked, he was just wondering if he should stuff red envelopes, and if he did, how big of one.

The impression that he had been trained by from fiction novels was that the other meaning of the Emperor not being worried but the eunuchs being worried was that the Emperor was good to provoke but the eunuchs weren't good to provoke. The protagonist of the story encounters a eunuch, no matter if the other party was a high governor or a lowly servant, they would always choose an occasion of "smokeless fire" to hand over several thin silver banknotes and even so far as a translucent jade plaything. What he viewed as the most unconvincing thing of those stories was, how did those main characters get so much jade?

Ning Que's brow rose as he glanced at Sang Sang, using his eyes to ask whether they should prepare something. Sang Sang had always been an extremely cheap individual – with a slight pause she then shook her head, completely acting like she didn't understand what he meant. That is to say, young master wasn't some generous person, and contemplating some thought was simply playing a fool. Saving some silver was some silver.

That little eunuch was holding both hands behind his back, sizing up the shop. Like an old person nodding his head, he used a clear voice to say, "I have heard that this street has some good calligraphy, today I see that it is indeed quite good. A noble of the palace wants to see your calligraphy, quickly go wash up and follow me."

Ning Que thought that this excuse was actually pretty good. Looking at what he was wearing, he clasped his hands towards that eunuch in a proper greeting, and smiling he said, "Ordinarily I dress like this, a poor scholar. How would I still be able to wash up and look much better?"

Originally he was a bit worried that since he hadn't given a red envelope, that he might trouble him, and hadn't thought that this little master didn't mind. Instead he slightly smiled, seemingly a bit fond of the way he spoke. Nodding to him, he walked out of the shop door.

Inside the slightly cramped carriage, the little eunuch closed his eyes the whole way. Seeing his performance earlier at 47th Street, he shouldn't have any opinions about Ning Que, and it wasn't because he disdained to speak with him, rather it was a customary precaution outside of the Palace.

Ning Que instead awakened in this quiet. Lifting up a corner of the rocking curtain he looked out at the street scenery, and could see under the clear sunlight, the common people of ChangAn wearing smiles as they walked in between workshops and markets. Every breakfast shop had business thriving; from time to time several calls out to friends could be heard. Where could half a bit of a shadow of the JiangHu's bloody battle last night be seen?

Without knowing how long had gone by, two rows of obscuring willows covered the sight, and a comfortable shade covered the entire carriage and the stony path the carriage crossed. The shadow wasn't from the willows, but rather from behind the willows and beyond the moat – the Imperial City.

The Tang Dynasty was the greatest nation under Heaven, and ChangAn City was the greatest city under Heaven. The Tang Dynasty's Imperial City used the most magnificent palace under Heaven – the Imperial Palace could be described with the word 'magnificent', perhaps not very fitting, but with the Tang Dynasty's Imperial Palace standing for a millennium, the Tang people had a grand bearing. The vermilion walls were sturdy and thick; the yellow eaves with a seemingly sword-like aura, were vast and solemn; and it didn't seem like there were three palaces, six courtyards, and seventy-two concubines applying make-up early in the morning and becoming distinguished nobles, but rather an imposing impregnable barrier that sat towering in the heart of the Tang Dynasty.

Ning Que raised his head towards that imposing, majestic Imperial City. With an ever calm expression his gaze followed to the very top of the vermilion city walls, looking towards that extremely tall portrait like a black dot of a Tang Dynasty Yu Lin Army soldier, but in his heart he silently admired.

Only it was a pity the carriage couldn't use the main Vermilion Bird Gateway to enter, but instead followed the moat around in a semi-circle, then from an extremely inconspicuous side door, they proceeded inside. The carriage entered the Imperial Palace, moving slowly along on those not at all spacious carriageways. Without knowing how many turns they turned, the line of sight was completely obscured by the soaring eaves of the walls next to the carriage. The only thing visible was the sky cut into pieces by the corners of the eaves of the walls. He completely didn't have a chance to see the entirety of the Imperial Palace, and was only able to see how extremely tall the inside of the Palace was.

From afar, at a green lake, a place of various work rooms could be seen. That little eunuch took Ning Que down from the carriage and began walking, and the two of them following a dense sea of bamboo by the

lakeside, walked for about the effort needed for several cups of tea. Passing through a wide rain corridor supported by big red pillars, only when they reached a row of inconspicuous little halls did they stop. What caused Ning Que to feel distrust, even as far as alarm was that along this long journey, he actually hadn't seen any guards, and didn't even see a single maid or eunuch.

That small eunuch turned his head over, his visibly expressionless face said, "This is the Imperial Study. I can only take you here. You wait here. After the visit, naturally someone will come take you to leave the Palace."

In the first place, Ning Que didn't care. With his hands clasped behind his back, brimming with interest, he looked at those different, strange flowering plants in front of the hall with interest. Looking at a distant flower boat in the middle of the lake covered by drooping willows, he thought whether it was possible to look at some beautiful palace girls. Suddenly he heard two words 'Imperial Study', and his body couldn't help but to slightly stiffen, stunned as he turned towards these unremarkable rooms.

A man's most secretive place isn't the bedroom, but is the study.

In heavy winter snow he could be in the study reading forbidden books, in a summer evening he could be in the study completely naked looking at erotica; in a spring's warm noon he could be in the study writing someone a secret love letter, and in a deep autumn night, he could be tearing off red sleeves, sitting in an embrace, kneading.

Here didn't have yellow-faced grandmother's meddling, and didn't have children playing. With private, secretive or happy matters, all could borrow the honorableness of ink, scrolls and books and be fine – no one

would come to disturb you.

The Emperor was also a man, and the Imperial Study naturally was his most private, secretive place. Who knows of how many major events in history, in how many reigns that shady and filthy things occurred inside of the Study. If it wasn't the Emperor's most trusted of trusted aides or preparing to become the most trusted of trusted aides, they absolutely would not have been qualified to enter the Imperial Study.

Wu ZeTian entered the Imperial Study, Zhang JuZheng entered the Imperial Study, Wei ZhongXian entered the Imperial Study, Wei XiaoBao entered the Imperial Study....Ning Que dazedly gazed at the tightly closed Imperial Study's tightly closed doors, sadly thinking, how many great women and how many formerly great, powerful ministers were castrated to enter this small little study in order for a soaring career. Unthinkable, who would have thought that in this time on this day, it would actually fall on his own head.

Last night he guessed that Chao XiaoShu's backing was someone in the Palace, and that the very great person within the Palace may be the Emperor himself. However speculation and actuality were two things, sixteen years ago a boy that was wandering in desperation, struggling to survive, suddenly found himself a chance to take one step and reach heaven – it was a bit difficult to not have some shock to the heart. He finally understood that what Chao XiaoShu said last night was even more real than gold and silver, it truly was the thickest thigh in the whole world.

"Within an hour, no one will come here. If someone comes to ask, just tell them the response I taught you before, just say that Lu Ji brought you into the Palace."

Flooded with regret, Ning Que completely hadn't noticed when that little eunuch had left. When he came to, he discovered that around the Imperial Study was already empty without a single person.

Surrounded by unfamiliarities and a thick forest within the Imperial Palace, and beside him without a single person he recognized, the cool, shaded surroundings around him instantly became a bit gloomy. Even as brave as he was, he couldn't help but to feel a bit uncomfortable. Standing in front of the corridor, waiting for a moment, he suddenly thought, was he supposed to go inside?

He and Sang Sang entered ChangAn City like country bumpkins, amazed for a good long while. Even more so this was the Imperial Palace, he completely didn't understand those rules, and only through common sense and theory thought like this, and so, he did exactly that. Lightly coughing twice, feigning and faking he went towards the Imperial Palace and cupped his hands, then pushed open the door and went inside.

What was effortless propriety was all bogus, Ning Que just wanted to go inside. In these years, the most important part of his life besides meditation and martial study, was the way of calligraphy. Today he finally had an extremely rare chance to enter the Imperial Study, of course the thirst of being able to see the Study of the rumored countless schools of godly calligraphy – this thirst was so strong, so intense that he completely forgot the so-called rules.

Pushing the door and entering, the sight upon entry was an extremely high wall of a bookshelf, that was level all across and erect. The design was extremely ordinary and simple, but the wood used was extremely rare fragrant rosewood from East Island. On the bookshelves, were books of all kinds packed in tight formation, arranged unevenly, but were all extremely rare treasures that were the only existing copies.

Atop a desk, several open books were placed, with a single brush like a single log in a clear pond laying in the middle of an inkstone, dipped in ink, and beside were several brushes placed messily on a brush holder. The paper was Xuan Province's sapling paper, the brushes were Horizontal Shop's simple brushes, the ink was from Chen Province's smooth ink, and the inkstone was a Yellow Province's heavy clay inkstone. Not one was eye-catching, but not one wasn't a precious tribute.

If these brushes, ink, paper and inkstones were taken out to 47th Street and sold, how much could they sell for? Ning Que dazedly looked around, inside he had no idea how he came up with this bastardly idea. Soon his eyes were drawn to three calligraphy pieces hung onto a flour-white wall.

Seeing these difficult to find, heirloom calligraphy pieces taken deep into the world of the Palace, he was indescribably shocked. His steps slowly moved, gaze falling on those square, stiff, bent and awkward, or smooth, refined, charming genuine famous work, and there was still those inscription stamps. His right hand subconsciously made drawing motions in the air, beginning to copy them, his face filled with joyous admiration.

Moving to the front of the desk, he saw a paper with five big, thickly-inked characters, and couldn't help but to frown, murmuring he said, "Your Majesty, your appreciation of capability level is actually quite high, but these characters simply have no bite."

Chapter 65: Leaping Fish In The Current Seas (Part 1)

Above the slightly grainy feel of the Xuan Province sapling paper, was restrained dripping calligraphy, writing out the words, "Leaping Fish in the Current Sea."

Seeing the entire winding of ink creating the figures, the piece above them should still have a phrase below. But unknowably why, these words were written on the paper and then tiring, the writer stopped writing. The last hook of the "Sea" (海) character was clearly hanging, faintly showing a trace of dissatisfaction.

These characters made up a hint of stern bearing. If an ordinary person wrote it it could be considered pretty good, but in Ning Que's eyes, he didn't feel it had anything appreciable, especially since he just enjoyed esteemed authentic works. Naturally he felt even more so that these characters "Leaping Fish in the Current Sea" were simply quite poor, and even if he guessed that these characters were written by His Majesty the Emperor himself, it wouldn't change his perception.

Thinking that today he entered the palace borrowing the excuse of calligraphy, Ning Que felt a slight stir in his heart. Thinking to himself that if in the future his own calligraphy entered the discernment of the Lord Emperor's, then it would be like riding a cloud going straight up in clear skies; being an unnoticeable person yet an extremely well-regarded servant was pretty good.

Just as he was thinking this, suddenly he heard an extremely angry voice from far far away in the back room of the Imperial Study. That voice was deep and powerful and seemed especially irritable, but because the

distance was too great, he could only clearly hear the most angry words of that cursing.

“Moron!Morons!A group of morons!”

The word ‘moron’ was yelled like rocks hitting the floor, powerfully resonating deeply like a war drum, and sharp and clear like striking a rock.

Ning Que stood inside of the Imperial Study in a daze, listening to the word “moron” as though it had come from out of the sky. Gradually he couldn’t help but to listen to it till he had gone silly, inside he felt a great feeling of familiarity; thinking to himself whichever big bureaucrat was being scolded as an moron was actually quite towards his own taste.

The Tang Dynasty’s Imperial Palace was a kind of stately and solemn place. Even if authority relied extremely heavily on eunuchs to manage, they wouldn’t dare to use such a loud voice to curse at someone, much less the voice scolding someone as a moron came from the Hall of Political Discussion.

Ning Que wasn’t clear on the placement of buildings in the Imperial Palace. Of course he wouldn’t know that all along the Imperial Study was extremely heavily guarded, and the Hall of Political Discussion was very close to the Imperial Study, so he could hear countless sentences of “moron”, but no one could see that he could hear it.

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Within the Hall of Political Discussion, dragons coiled around jade

pillars, and gold curtains were embroidered with celestial maidens and flowers. Left of the Imperial Throne sat a married, beautiful woman in Palace clothing, perhaps thirty years old. With a gorgeous face looking around, she didn't lose any of her charm. With very prominent gentleness, her slightly thick lips tightly pursed together added to her slightly firm expression. Seeing her phoenix hair ornament, this was the Tang Dynasty's Empress.

On the Imperial Throne's right side sat a 16 or 17 year old girl. Her eyes were slightly dropping as she used her slender finger to separate tea. With a bright and elegant bearing coupled with a quiet expression, she appeared extremely graceful. Since fleeing from the Grasslands and tanning by the sun, her cheeks showed a slight tan, but now dozens of days later she recovered her fairness – this was exactly the Tang Dynasty's 4th Princess, Li Yu.

In between the Empress and the Princess below, on the Imperial Chair sat a middle-aged man, with black hair very casually tied behind his head. Wearing an extremely loose robe, his voice though gentle and powerful, was unquestionable. Occasionally when he said that word, the tone of his voice would be like fleeting clouds attacking a mountain, fiercely rising and thundering throughout the hall.

At the floor in front of the Imperial Seat, kneeled ten-some officials. They deeply bowed their heads with their bodies slightly trembling, appearing especially ashamed and fearful, while the qualified His Highness the Prince and two old minsters' expressions were extremely ugly.

The Tang Dynasty had never been heavy on secular customs, even if it was the daily interaction between a ruler and his ministers. Officials often wouldn't need to kneel and kowtow, and only needed to clasp their

hands in a salute – especially in a generation of His Majesty the Emperor widely known as tolerant. Ordinarily when a ruler and his ministers met in the Hall of Political Discourse, His Majesty would even brush off the courtesy of the clasping hands salute.

But today the tolerant king suddenly exploded in thunderous anger – the group of Tang Dynasty ministers once again found that His Majesty didn't ordinarily want them to kneel because he was happy; when he wasn't happy, the Hall of Political Discourse became terrifying.

On the Imperial Seat the middle-aged man naturally was the Tang Dynasty's Emperor – on secular things in the Hao Tian World, he was the most powerful in the world. He gazed at the ministers kneeling on ice cold gold bricks in front of him, calmly showing a trace of a mocking gaze slowly as it brushed over everyone's face – Commander of the Middle, of the Frontier, and a general Huai Hua – these were all military chiefs. The Right Deputy Minister, Assistant Minister of the Center, the old and young of the Ministry of Revenue, Magistrate of the Capitol, Assistant Minister of the Yellow Gate, ChangAn City's Two Statues, and also his own younger brother sitting in a chair, and also those fellows so old they didn't look human. In the end, in regards to this matter, how much did they know?

"One gang that is able to take over the river transportation business, and able to transport grains under guard, so what? You are all high officials in the Court, and can handle official matters with one word. Who knows how many people would tremble frightened? So what if some Chao XiaoShu dares to not listen to you? Are you all truly a group of morons? Could you have never thought of the reason?"

It was like the Tang Dynasty's His Majesty the Emperor looked at the group of grandchildren mixed up in a mosquito net as he looked at his

own ministers. Using his right hand, he stroked the slight pain on the back of his head, because he was so angry and disappointed he even had the urge to laugh out loud. He glared at the group, using strength to strike the gavel, and reprovably said, "You all want to see who the backing of the ChangAn's number one gang is? And now you know, know that it is Us. Do you feel that you have become the world's biggest morons!"

"Fish Dragon Gang! Fish Dragon Gang! You all have extensively read books your whole life, and are officials used to seeing wind and rain. That actually not a single one thought of the four words, 'fish dragon concealed dress'? If it wasn't My intent, who in ChangAn City would dare to use this name as their gang name? We are very disappointed at you all. Not disappointed that you disregarded the laws and bullied the common people, but disappointed in your stupidity! Morons! Such a simple matter, yet to actually not understand it after watching for so many years, if you all aren't morons, who is!"

With the chaotic battle of a rainy spring night in ChangAn City, indeed at the very end, success forced out Chao XiaoShu's cards. However once this card was revealed, suddenly the wind and rain disappeared without a trace – because this card simply was too powerful; powerful till it only needed one word, and could define everyone as a moron, and then begin to settle the scores.

The ministers kneeling on the Palace floor feeling wronged and aggrieved didn't know what to say. Silently thinking of the years gone by, no one had discovered the Fish Dragon Gang and the Palace had any kind of connection. Moreover, you are the unspeakably noble true dragon, the Son of Heaven, while the Fish Dragon Gang was just a little carp in a dark gutter of ChangAn. The distance was hundreds, thousands of miles, completely not an existence of the same world. Who would've

thought that these would actually be connected?

This was like a county clerk's teacher wanting to trouble a small worker of the back kitchen. As a result of the noise in the end, the clerks unexpectedly discovered this office was covered by the Ministry of Revenue! But the problem was, a fellow covered by the Ministry of Revenue, how could he become a little worker of the back kitchen!

If Chao XiaoShu was a friend Your Majesty had met among the common people years ago and had become friends, then why in all these years would he always be soaking in the JiangHu, this smelly gutter? With just one word, how could they not be able to find 4 or 5 shortages of officials in the Empire and give the position to him? This was the stupidity of the king's ministers. This was purely Your Majesty treating us as idiots and playing with us.

Kneeling onto the ice cold gold bricks, and restlessly sitting in the chair, the powerful ministers of the Tang Dynasty were entirely with bellies full of discontent, but right now no one dared to jump out and argue a few words with that man in the Dragon Chair.

For these influential people of the Empire, fighting or speaking of subduing Spring Wind Pavilion's Old Chao was a small matter, and the result was coming across the biggest mountain under Heaven. Inside they were clear this would inevitably end badly, and more importantly was that their subordinates in charge of these matters used the Court like they were a military strength – this already touched His Majesty's limits.

What bureau should handle this?

Chapter 66: Leaping Fish Of The Current Seas (Part 2)

Xing ChengYu of the Ministry of Revenue had never thought that the gold bricks had ever felt so hard. Actually besides great Imperial meetings, he very rarely knelt, and even more rarely knelt in this way for so long.

He sneakily wiped the cold sweat on his forehead, and felt like his lower back was already about to break. In order to find some kind of mental comfort, he sneakily glanced towards his side. Seeing that Military Department's boss with a defeated expression he indeed felt a lot of comfort, spontaneously raising both his feeling of luck and feeling of fear

The Secretary of the Treasury, Qing Yun wanted that area of 47th Street, and also seemed to be the cause of the conflict, but in fact he was just a small little primer. Also even though I knew, I didn't interfere all along – but you guys in the Military Department waded really deep in this time. That rainy night more than twenty Yu Lin Army troops were rumored to have been killed, and also a Mysterious Cavern realm Enchanter lost his life. With such a situation, how can His Majesty let you off easily?

That middle-aged man atop the Dragon Chair that continued to ring with mockery and anger brimming in his words, finally let out a very disappointed sigh. "Back then We created such a gang to serve as eyes and ears of the Empire among the people; hiding for over ten years was very difficult. As the result of you group of fellows forcibly forcing it to light for some petty profits, now it has no way of accomplishing what We want. We call you morons, is that wrong?"

His Majesty heaved a regretful sigh, and the ministers sighed regretfully. By now all of them already knew the Fish Dragon's help – it was precisely the result of when His Majesty or the Prince were sight-seeing around ChangAn City. Each minister was silently thinking to themselves that this was just a play and that's all, how could there be so many interpretations?

Just in this moment, His Majesty the Emperor's voice became deep and cold. The hint of mockery completely disappeared. Staring penetratingly at the group of ministers he questioned, "The question is asked again, were you truly only doing it for those petty profits? We know what you all want to do, but how can Our wife and daughter look at the provocation of you group of death-seeking morons? You all have carried the name of the Empress and the Princess causing trouble in ChangAn City, but you definitely didn't know that the true Empress was very clear about the relationship between that little gang and the Palace. And when Yu'er was small, We personally took her to Spring Wind Pavilion to play!"

Up to this point of lecturing, the ministers on the floor finally had no way of taking these waves after waves of absurd and cold attacks. The general Huai Hua and the Official of the Yellow Gate had numb legs at the same time, and from a kneeling position they went into basket sitting.

The Emperor coldly looked at the two of them and said, "The Tang Dynasty's servicemen's duty is to protect our land and open new territories, and not to be used to help criminal gangs snatch territory! What We especially despise is that you actually wanted to snatch it and didn't succeed! As such, Zhong DouHu, go to ChangNing City and train the soldiers well for Us and train for three to five years. Whenever you are sure the soldiers at your command could beat a gang of ChangAn City, then roll back."

ChangNing City was located at the southwest of the Empire, where

spring days were humid and hot and winter days were damp and cold. In between the mountains were a lot of forests, a lot of miasma and a lot of pests – Tang Dynasty officials always viewed it as a dangerous route. In addition to staying for three to five years he also had to beat a criminal gang of ChangAn City.....no matter what His Majesty had said himself, if he couldn't win in that, then why would you come back?

In just casual words, a military chief was assigned to a bitter township and also the extreme possibility of never being able to return to central administration. The punishment couldn't be said to not be harsh, and the ministers of the hall became increasingly scared. But Zhong DouHu himself having heard that his head would stay on, didn't hesitate to knock his head hard on the ground twice, repeatedly showing his gratitude without stopping.

His Majesty the Emperor had even insulted them as morons tens of times, and was a bit exhausted. Seeing these high ministers that didn't dare to argue also made him feel a bit weary. Since Li Yu passed over a tea cup he drank two sips, and then waved his hand.

Old Sir Lin dodged from the side of the Imperial Seat and went out. His withered thin hands slowly pulled open a bright yellow Imperial Edict, and read without any expression, "Thirteenth year of the Sky Opening Emperor.....Xing ChengYu is to go back to his home and meditate in reflection for three months, We await the memorandum of the discussion of your sins."

The so-called sin memorandum was just a statement. This was His Majesty giving the high ministers of the Court face, to let them take the initiative to resign and return to their townships. Xing ChengYu kowtowed in reply, thinking that his own official career was cut short by a gang in ChangAn City because of such a small matter. Supporting his body with

both hands, he couldn't help but tremble.

After Old Sir Lin read the Imperial Edict expressionlessly, one of the assistant ministers of legal punishment, and the Ministry of Revenue and Transportation in charge of the storeroom, from top to bottom were purged at once. Several ministers of ChangAn's government were dismissed on the spot, and the magistrate of the capitol's expression darkened as he was expelled to around Tianshui. The Official of the Yellow Gate was handed a hearing involving charges of crimes, and the Military Department suffered the heaviest attacks – General XiaHou sent an angry letter wanting an explanation from the Military Department about why his capable field officer Zhuo'er would be killed by the Military Department. Consequently His Majesty the Emperor executed seven people from the Military Department as an appeasement for the far away general on the border, or perhaps it was an appeasement for Chao XiaoShu.

As he was reading the Imperial Edict, demotions and executions of officials proceeded. No matter if those officials kowtowed till they bled, or loudly cried foul, or felt grateful, His Majesty the Emperor from start to finish was silent without speaking a word. Only when the replacements for the Ministry of Appointments and at the same time the magistrate of the capitol were suggested, did he frown and remember a name.

"ChangAn's Judiciary Army.....that so-and-so called ShangGuan?"

"ShangGuan YuYang." The minister from the Ministry of Appointments said. He glanced at His Majesty's expression, trying to guess his thinking. After lightly coughing twice he continued saying, "His official assessment is considerably good. In his early years in the past, he was of decent Imperial examination background, but only because of his unsightly appearance, so....."

"We want officials that govern the people, and not select beautiful people." The Emperor impatiently waved his hand and said, "Then that person."

In the Hall of Political Discourse, the officials were expelled or sent home, and gradually only the most important figures were left. The whole while with his eyes to his nose, and his nose to his heart, the Prince who had been quietly sitting like a statue, finally had no way of sitting any longer. From his chair he stood up and walked in front of the Imperial Seat, with a ~pa he kneeled down.

The Tang Dynasty's royal family, or perhaps discussing the present His Majesty the Emperor, always attached great importance on family love. In those history books of internal conflicts of contention within the Imperial Palace, in regards to the Prince's only brother, His Majesty the Emperor was trusting and more. In front of the ministers he absolutely wouldn't make him lose face, but the Prince knew that so-called face was all fought for. Today if he still didn't want face, then his royal brother would especially lose face.

Sure enough today, extremely rarely, His Majesty the Emperor didn't even tell him to stand up, but rather dominatingly and coldly watched his face, observing just how much grief in between his own brother's eyes was real, and how much of that hurt was acting. Only after a long while had passed and with the Empress's persuasion beside him did his appearance clear up the anger, and in a cold voice he said, "Lift up your head. Look at me."

His Highness the Prince slowly raised his head, looking directly at the soulless gaze atop the Imperial Seat.

"Wang JingLue was consecrated by your Mansion?"

"Yes."

"We had you examine military effectiveness and you felt it was pathetic?"

"Your minister doesn't dare."

"We had him follow Xu Shi for polishing, for his benefit."

Xu Shi is the number one general in the Tang Dynasty, and Wang JingLue was known as a cultivating genius. Under the command of that metal-blooded general, presumably his temperament could gain some benefit. His Highness slightly paused, then at once showed gratitude.

"No need for gratitude. At the very least, no need for you to show gratitude for him."

The Emperor looked at his brother, then with a cold voice he said, "For a talent to appear in my Tang Dynasty isn't easy, thus We want to protect him. But my Tang Dynasty's talents can only fight for the Tang Dynasty, and definitely cannot become your own personal asset, understand?"

These words hit the heart, and the Prince suddenly felt tightness in his chest. Sweat like broth seeped out his back, instantly moistening the Prince's robes. He didn't know how he should respond, and once again

lowered his head with a humble attitude praying for pardon.

"These past years We have bestowed upon you not just a few good things. Lately there's been some shortages in the warehouse. Do some contributions, and We will note your good deeds."

"This minister doesn't dare."

"In this world is there anything you don't dare to do?"

The Emperor smiled and said, "A grand prince would actually indulge in opening a brothel. If it weren't for a simple handkerchief given to the Empress years ago, We don't know how many years you would've hidden it from Us."

It wasn't a sneer, and nothing sharp about the words could be felt, but the Prince felt a formless pressure on his body suddenly increased several times. The sweat like broth gushed with a faster and faster speed on his back. Nervously waiting for His Majesty's decree, but after waiting for a very long time, he didn't hear it and inevitably was a bit suspicious.

The smile on the Emperor's face slowly straightened, and calmly looking at him he said, "This time We will not heavily punish you, and not for anything else but because of you opening that one business of watching red sleeves, that I found someone that said the words that he would be absolutely loyal to Us on behalf of you."

The Prince suddenly realized that day Chao XiaoShu had gone to the Red Sleeves, his head servant had once relayed a report of Cui DeLu. Even

though he was loyal to the man on the Imperial Seat second to none, but he wasn't willing to say much to an underling, always feeling that it was a bit of a loss of face. Today thinking of it, instead he still ought to give many thanks for him saying those words.

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In the first year of the Sky Opening Emperor's reign, the Tang Dynasty's winds were nice and the rains were smooth. The Court and the fields were harmonious like sunlight and earth, and there also arose two old, comparatively large legal cases. One was that year's Astronomical Incident, and the other was this incident that happened recently, and the people called it "The Spring Wind Pavilion Case".

In the case of Spring Wind Pavilion, publicly more than ten officials were demoted or chased from office, and the military department had seven people executed. But secretly, some crucial people in key places were brought forward and purged. Because those positions involved the security of the Imperial Palace and the impact was too negative, so the news was sealed very tightly.

In that rainy spring night, the Yu Lin Army's deputy general Cao Ning greeted Old Sir Lin from the Palace, and brought about his own death. Previously still imprisoning Chang the Third, known as Chang SiWei and Fei the Sixth, known as Fei JingWei, Old Sir Lin holding His Majesty's personally written edict, directly had this person beheaded in the rain. Then his sudden death was reported as illness.

In that same rainy spring night, the Fish Dragon Gang's Liu the Fifth, known as Liu Si, galloping with his spear in the Brave Rider's camp's drilling ground, with one spear strike he repaid secret hatred from ten

years before towards the vice-commander of the Brave Riders Army, Chu Ren, and completed His Majesty's assigned mission.

And also after this event in the spring rain, very many people of the Tang Empire's upper echelons learned of the name Spring Wind Pavilion's Old Chao, or began to notice this name, and they also very much wanted to know who that youngster from the Yue Lun Kingdom beside him was who killed people like killing weeds – but they had nowhere to go ask.

Chao XiaoShu stood at the bank of a lake in the Imperial Garden, calmly looking at what was a great lake called the Li Sea. The blue robes on him slightly fluttered in the wind of the lake.

With eunuchs and palace ladies behind him, he humbly leaned aside to give way. People already knew who he was now, and knew what he will be in the future, and they didn't at all hide the envy, curiosity and even admiration in their eyes.

Chao XiaoShu seemed to have felt nothing. His face didn't have the cold sternness when killing people last night, nor could the nervousness be seen that someone having just entered the Imperial Palace from the wilderness of the JiangHu should have. His expression was natural and calm.

A golden carp leapt from inside the Li Sea, over the Palace maids, and used the garlands to turn into dragon, then cheerfully once again fell into the water.

Very many people saw it. Chao XiaoShu in today's ChangAn City was like a fish leaping into the current sea, his fame greatly resonating like a

rising cloud in clear skies.

But he didn't think so.

Chapter 67: Blossoms Open Transcendental Skies (Part 1)

It was the biggest instance of shock within the Hall of Political Discourse during the Great Tang Dynasty's Sky Opening reign. Within every department, unknown numbers of officials were trembling in fear, guessing their own and their bosses' fates. While the youth in the Imperial Study was amidst excitedly looking around, Chao XiaoShu was standing somewhere in the Imperial Garden, thinking that he completely had no relation to these current events. He silently stood by this big lake called Li Ocean, smiling as he watched those five spotted, six-colored carp leaping from the surface of the water, jumping over the Dragon Gate, and then luckily falling once again into the lake, swishing their tails begging for food; and he occasionally sighed.

Ten years ago, he had gone to the capitol in order to take the test for the Academy, but nowadays the Emperor led that young scholar into ChangAn's JiangHu. Ten years later he cut down countless heads with the sword as the night-time Underworld's blue-robed, austere patron. Standing at the lakeside and thinking of the past age and thinking of the future road ahead, his heart naturally had a different feeling, and didn't feel that the path of a cloud in clear skies was of any interest; he only thought of returning to those first days of hard studying day and night, the old days of wholehearted studying towards the Dao.

The sudden ringing of a ring of ornaments smashed the silence of the lakeside, and a quiet and elegant young princess, bringing with her two maids close by, slowly walked over. Li Yu's gaze fell onto the somewhat faded blue robes of the middle-aged man at the lakeside. Slightly pausing, she smiled and gave a half-curtsy in a greeting, and softly said, "Greetings Uncle Chao."

The Great Tang's fourth princess Li Yu, much beloved by His Majesty, venerated and loved by the people – even if she came across His Highness the Prince, she would only need to lightly call out Royal Uncle. Had she ever addressed a man so intimately?

"This coarse person doesn't dare."

Chao XiaoShu stood aside to give way, his voice continuously fearful and humble, with the expression on his face full of fear and humbleness. Then with a slight dodge of his body, the lake wind moved a corner of his robes. Where was there half a bit of the sense of fearful humbleness? Merely in the respectfulness of his manners, it showed the rejection and estrangement of a thousand miles.

Seeing Chao XiaoShu's reaction, Li Yu's hands hanging at her waist slightly stiffened, and the two nanny maids behind her suddenly became displeased. Without waiting for them to take any kind of action, Li Yu slightly smiled and rushed to respond, "Bringing up when I was small and Imperial Father let the guards carry me to play, I saw Uncle in the gambling street many times, but after all I was young then. Afterwards unexpectedly I slowly forgot. Uncle Chao has only carried his niece before, what is the need for acting so much like the stranger today?"

"Your Highness' words truly make this coarse person fearful. How would I dare to be an elder of the Princess?"

Chao XiaoShu replied with a slight smile. The sunlight reflected by the lake's waters fell on his clear and handsome face, and nowhere could there be the slightest bit of deliberate humility, only the strict adherence of a ruler and his ministers, without daring to take a single step forward.

Li Yu had time and time again meant well, and Chao XiaoShu had time and time again deflected her neither harshly nor softly. The atmosphere around the lakeside became a bit tense and even oppressive. Li Yu quietly looked at this middle-aged man's face, and thought of her Imperial Father's angry display since last night till today, showing his desire to protect this person, and moreover showing the extreme importance of this person's place in the Imperial Father's mind. Waving her hand to stop the whispering urges of the palace maids, with a smile she continued, "I brought back some barbarian guards from the Grasslands. I heard that a few days ago someone wanted to ask them about some things, that the person was named Chen, and it seems he is your brother?"

Chao XiaoShu was a bit taciturn and replied, "He is called Chen the Seventh, and is my brother."

Hearing this response, Li Yu smiled. Her eyes shifted towards that sea-like lake, watching a leaf being disturbed by swimming fish under the surface, and asked, "Was that boy of good use?"

"Your Highness Princess, I didn't use him, I only asked him to help me." Chao XiaoShu replied saying, "It was a joining of hands, and not using."

"If it was joining of hands, then he also has become your brother?" Li Yu turned her head around, her brow slightly knitted and asked.

Chao XiaoShu thought of the fried egg and noodles of the Old Brush House and Ning Que's response, and with a self-disparaging smile he said, "He's someone who sees this world even colder than me."

He looked at Li Yu's expression, and seriously said, "Your Highness, he doesn't want people to know, so if Your Highness would please help him keep this secret."

Li Yu slightly paused and then mockingly said, "Does that idiot think he can hide this thing for long? Wearing a black mask with a Yue Lun Kingdom hairstyle trying to hide his identity forever?"

Chao XiaoShu replied saying, "He's about to be admitted into the Academy, and he's been admitted into the second floor. By that time naturally he won't need to fear other people plotting against him."

Li Yu thought of elderly Lu QingChen's assessment of Ning Que, and frowned and asked, "Why are your assessments of him so high?"

Chao XiaoShu slightly smiled and said, "Because he is of value."

Thinking of the blade's shine at North Mountain Crossing, thinking of the figure of a tiger leaping into a blaze, thinking of the stories beside the fire – the expression on Li Yu's face unconsciously became soft, but her voice still seemed a bit cold and mocking. "Back then I gave him a chance, but he wouldn't take it. I originally thought he was a maverick that viewed career, power and money as fleeting clouds. I hadn't thought that he was merely thinking that kind of way of living wasn't bright enough, absolutely insisting on choosing this kind of method of debuting in ChangAn City."

"But no matter what is said, it was I who brought him into ChangAn City, and that means he is my person....." Li Yu seemed to want to smile but couldn't as she looked at Chao XiaoShu. "Uncle Chao, you used my

person so harshly, shouldn't you tell me in advance?"

The testing clash of words finally became a mental contest. The Fourth Princess Li Yu was naturally the most outstanding girl in this regard of the young generation, but facing Spring Wind Pavilion's Old Chao who was used to seeing bloody wind and bloody rain, she never would've thought in the slightest of what she would see – only Chao XiaoShu's respectful smile was seen, and he said, "If he is Princess' person, why would he be troubled into that state for a little shop? And I believe Princess should see very clearly, that little fellow will never become a person for someone else. He is someone only for himself."

After repeated tries, unexpectedly she couldnot find the slightest chance to take advantage of, and couldn't even find a small crack to talk about the current topic. Li Yu was silent for a moment, and waved her hand, indicating for the Palace nanny maids behind her to leave. Seeing his expression she said, "Uncle Chao....."

Chao XiaoShu again evaded, and repeated, "This coarse person doesn't dare."

Li Yu shook her head, and then seriously said, "Everyone in the world knows that after today, Spring Wind Pavilion's Old Chao can no longer be the Imperial Father's coarse person hidden among the commonfolk, and can no longer be the head of ChangAn City's number one gang. Whether it is as Head of the Imperial Guards, a high minister or even if you were released free, in the whole world you have only one place."

"When you were Spring Wind Pavilion's Old Chao, or those ministers that dared to attack me, or those who have gone looking for you in the Empress Mother's name to recruit you or intimidate you – and now you

have already leapt out to sea. Do you think that from now on you can stay beyond, uninvolved?"

Li Yu calmly watched him. With her tone cordial but not in the least hiding anything she said, "Empress Mother is an intelligent person. I'm also not stupid, so we won't do anything that Imperial Father wouldn't like us to do, but we absolutely have to do some things."

"I hope you'll support me."

"When I was small you held me before. You also held my little brother, and you've seen my mother. Don't tell me that you've steeled your heart seeing my brother being sidelined from the Imperial Throne, and have steeled your heart seeing my mother in a hidden spring of the Underworld, full of unreconciled sorrow?"

The Tang Dynasty didn't care who was the heir, because whoever it was, was completely within one spoken word of His Majesty the Emperor. Those who seemed weak but were in fact peerlessly clear-minded Emperors wouldn't allow their own Empresses and children to do any harm to the nation with wars that exceeded his patience limit, but he wanted to see who showed the most excellence after all.

In this world, in the histories there were very few Imperial families that would be so transparent and open-minded like this case, but today what Li Yu said to Chao XiaoShu on the lakeside was still too sincere and frank, and even a bit bare; extremely incongruent with how people thought of these Palace conspiracies.

Chao XiaoShu was silent for a long time, watching her talk and said,

"Your Highness the Princess and your mother are truly alike, incomparably intelligent and brave; knowing that I'm this kind of coarse JiangHu person that no kind of probing inducement will be effective, and that using the JiangHu way of talking is more suitable. However in the end this is a virtuous and benevolent matter that is decided by oneself. I'm just a small fish in this piece of sea of the Great Tang. Even if fortunately I have the opportunity to have scales, but I cannot rise to have any other use."

"Uncle Chao is too modest. You must know that in these years, I have never seen someone that Imperial Father has believed in like this....and he even brutally locked that one shocking talent from back then that was preparing for examination at the Academy in a dark gutter in East City without release, locking him for a few years. I believe inside, Imperial Father feels extremely guilty towards you."

Li Yu firmly looked at him, and said, "The most important thing is, you're here in this sea of the Great Tang. Even if you are leaping from the sea, in the end you will still fall once again into the sea. You will eventually have to pick which side to swim on....."

She didn't even finish speaking, and Chao XiaoShu unfurled with a smile. Bravely and clearly being forced, he raised his arm and sweeping his blue sleeve he pointed at the big lake, and said, "I'm a single fish, but I don't want to stay inside of a lake. Even if it is that big lake like a sea, in the end it is still a lake. So if I am truly forced to pick which side to swim on, perhaps in the end I will simply choose to come ashore."

Li Yu's brow slightly knitted and she said, "Fish going ashore will die of thirst."

"But before dying it could breathe more than enough air." Chao XiaoShu said smiling.

"Uncle Chao insists that the Imperial Clan is that kind of lake? Can you possibly find a lake bigger than my Great Tang's greatness under the sky?"

"Even though the JiangHu is a bit smaller, but it is more casual and free. In comparison, I would indeed rather be in the distant JiangHu, and am unwilling to stand atop a temple."

Li Yu's knitted brow looked at this unconventional blue robed middle-aged scholar on the lakeside, and suddenly found that she could not at all understand some people, and cried out, "The dangers in JiangHu are not just a few!"

Chao XiaoShu slightly smiled and said, "But the JiangHu is far enough, so there is freedom."

Li Yu shook her head and said, "What kind of freedom could you have?"

Chao XiaoShu looked at her like looking at the younger generation with pained sympathy, and said, "The freedom to not choose."

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Ning Que's hands really itched. This was a habitual itch that he had

been accustomed to for many years, already going deeply into his bone marrow and blood vessels. There was simply no way of getting rid of it, only miserably waiting.

In the quiet Imperial Study with no one inside, he went from the entrance to the desk, from the desk to the bookshelves, and from the bookshelves to the entrance. Hidden in his sleeves, his right hand incessantly rubbed his fingers, but all along he had no way of stopping that itch from boring out of its depths.

The itch of seeing the masterpieces posted on the wall. The itch of seeing those carelessly placed Heng Shop simple brushes. The itch of smelling the scent of Chen Province's special use loose ink. The itch of touching the fine furrows of Xuan Province's sapling paper. His gaze fell onto the Emperor Father's characters of "Leaping Fish in the Current Seas", and he became even itchier such that he began to blink – that was difficult to stop.

And so to resolve the itch, the only way was to write.

However, to continue His Majesty's personal work with Imperial brushes in the Imperial Study, this was an extremely stupid kind of decision. There could be very heavy punishment, and he could even possibly receive even more serious punishment, but he truly itched.....when Chao XiaoShu was discussing his choice of freedom, meanwhile Ning Que was going through this painful choice.

"Write it and then quickly tear it out."

After finding a good excuse, Ning Que happily cried out, charging to

the front of the table like a true man going to eat meat and drink liquor. He mixed the ink, clutching a brush and spreading out a new sheet of paper. When his heart accumulated several breaths of the itch, everything was written with pleasure. With one wave, vivid characters were inked.

“Blossoms Open Transcendental Skies.”

Chapter 68: Blossoms Open Transcendental Skies (Part II)

To play with an axe in front of the legendary craftsman Lu Ban's door, sell liquor in front of the legendary brewer Du Kang's storefront, and to dry books in front of the sage Fu Zi's door was certainly the most immodest behavior. But if the perspective was changed, when Lu Ban saw that fellow handling his axe in front of his door, when Du Kang saw that fellow in front of his liquor shop, when Fu Zi saw that fellow in front of his door where he dried books, and in that particular moment they discovered the most supreme sacred existence beyond the secular world, would they not act on their itch that was birthed from the deepest depths of their being like Ning Que had?

I want to create a wooden bird that explains to that fellow that flight works like this with a flying model. I want to brew a fine liquor that tells that fellow that a destroyed country's brews worked like this. I want to write some long-winded words that tells that fellow this is what food for thought is. I want to write a few characters that tells that fellow what kind of characters could be called calligraphy – even if you are the Emperor, Son of Heaven, you have to obediently listen to me.

Ning Que in this very moment, was immersed inside this kind of extreme pleasure. He looked in satisfaction at the gradually drying ink on the Xuan Province's sapling paper, fantasizing about talking with His Majesty the Emperor's calligraphy teacher, and using those natural and elegant brush strokes of ink to whip that old man's palms, berating sternly with contemptuous disdain.

"Written wrong again! Stretch out your hand for a spanking!"

He was exceptionally satisfied with the characters he wrote, and even felt that they were the best characters he'd written in years. Besides the brush, ink, paper and inkstone of all equally fine quality, located in the Imperial Study, this fantastic place, the most important reason was still because he had accumulated too much itch in this room, and even more because of the fact that the first characters were written by His Majesty himself.

He was deeply admiring his own curving use of the brush, the smooth and broadly rich imposing manner. In a moment he unexpectedly didn't want to destroy this paper, and thus he prepared to take this paper outside to dry completely and then hide it in his sleeve, and secretly take it out of the Palace. But just in that moment, outside the Imperial Study that had all along been quiet without a sound, suddenly echoed with an indignant groan.

"Where did that rotten thing run off to!"

Ning Que was alarmed, and raised his head just to see a hand pushing open the door of the Imperial Study.

His pupils shrank, and with a quick reaction his finger made a tiny flick, and the drying calligraphy sheet on top of the table slid lightly into an empty corner of the bookshelf. Closely following with a turn of his body, he held his sleeves feigning seriousness as he looked at the shelves of the book collection. With his sleeves swishing, the row of books already changed the direction of tilt, pressing that Blossoms Open Transcendental Skies tightly inside. No one would be able to see that someone had once moved it.

Walking into the Imperial Study was a short and stout middle-aged

general, wearing Palace guard clothing. Fastened on his belt was a black gold lace, showing his extremely high rank. This middle-aged general saw Ning Que next to the books, and watching the oblivious youth, focused like a bookworm as he read, his eyes turned angry, and he sternly yelled out, "Who the hell let you come in?"

Ning Que seemed oblivious but was actually all along listening to sounds from the back room. Hearing these words his heart thumped, and guessed that there was some misunderstanding in this, that he should have misheard what that little eunuch had told him. This shouldn't be a conspiracy like White Tiger Hall – if the Palace wanted to handle this kind of small person, they simply wouldn't need to make such moves. However to enter the Imperial Study without permission, this kind of crime could be big and could be small; no matter what he wouldn't let himself fall into this kind of trouble.

He turned his head around like a cute little scholar mesmerized by the book collection. Rubbing his eyes, he looked at the short and stout Imperial Guard Chief, and with his face full of confusion he said, "I was given Imperial Orders for an audience. What is the problem?"

The short and stout Imperial Guard Chief slightly paused. He had probably never imagined that someone being caught inside of the Imperial Study could still be so cool and so calm, and his face couldn't help but to show a flabbergasted expression. Painfully using his hand to cover his forehead, and angrily talking to himself he said, "Old Chao you bastard! You didn't teach any of the rules in advance!"

Ning Que came out from behind the table he was at, cupping his hands in propriety he quizzically asked, "Sir general, you know Big Brother Chao?"

At 47th Street, in Spring Wind Pavilion, no matter the kind of heroic temperament he showed to Chao XiaoShu, all along Ning Que didn't recognize the word 'brother'. But in the very moment he didn't hesitate in the slightest and naturally said these two words "big brother" in order to protect himself, as if asking this question back was to parry, to attack. In any event, his objective was to take the other party's attention somewhere else other than the Imperial Study.

The short and stout Imperial Guard Chief confirmed that no one else was in the Imperial Study. With his face full of alertness and worry he looked at the surroundings, and not discovering anything unusual, with some lingering fear he again covered his forehead. With a pained expression he said to Ning Que, "Kid, quickly roll yourself out of here. Daddy has been looking for you for half an hour, who would've thought that you would actually dare to come in here? Remember this, today you didn't come here. In your whole life don't think about bragging about it to people, or else I'll destroy you!"

Ning Que followed the complaining nagging Chief of the Imperial Guard and left the Imperial Study, heading west and circling for two paces. Then they came to the Spring Harmony Hall's daytime office of the Imperial Guard.

Within the darkness of the room, he finally knew that this short, stout and angry, with a HeBei accent fellow, with every word seeming to carry the scent of green onions, was unexpectedly the Palace's Imperial Guard Vice Commander Xu ChongShan – exactly the host that Chao XiaoShu had said he would come in to see last night.

"His Majesty is extremely fond of calligraphy, and you just happen to

sell calligraphy. And so this identity was used to take you inside the Palace, just to avoid eyes and ears. Since you are a piece of work kid, unexpectedly without a noise or sound you went into the Imperial Study! Do you actually think you're some kind of great calligrapher! Did you really think His Majesty invited you here to award your writings!"

Xu ChongShan angrily pointed at Ning Que's nose and snarled in a low voice, saliva like the stars flew splashing, filling the sky.

Ning Que rubbed his nose in distress, secretly thinking that indeed His Majesty didn't invite him here to award him for calligraphy, but he had already written some words in the Imperial Study, what can you get to show me how it works? Thinking of this, and thinking of that Blossoms Open Transcendental Skies pressed into a nook of a bookshelf, he secretly wondered, in the future, how would he get this thing out?

Xu ChongShan was a bit tired of berating. Panting, he grasped his thick and solid waist, and said, "Let's talk about your matter."

Ning Que happily smiled and replied, "Please speak."

Xu ChongShan glanced at him a bit strangely, and said, "You this happy-go-lucky youth, where do you have half of the appearance that Old Chao's said?"

"That's because you Sir Commander, your tiger-like power is too magnificent." Ning Que very seriously explained.

A golden mountain, a silver mountain, copper walls and metal bastions

can all be pierced, only flattery cannot be. Even if it was a young and clumsy flattery, it would have its uses. Even more so, this fellow that gave the flattery was a young and clumsy youth. Xu ChongShan's face became a bit better, and then after clearly coughing twice he asked, "By now you should know who Old Chao is associated with right?"

Ning Que slightly frowned, and feigning stupidity he asked, "Big Brother Chao is Sir Commander's subordinate?"

"I don't have the guts to go and order Spring Wind Pavilion's Old Chao, besides.....from now on don't call him big brother Chao. There were already fewer of those old people from back then. We're used to calling him Chao Second Brother." Xu ChongShan sternly said.

Immediately he thought of the massacre in the spring rain last night, and thinking of Old Chao's assessment of this youth, and seeing that Ning Que was a bit pleasing to the eye, the topic suddenly changed and with a smile he asked, "Last night, why did you want to go help Old Chao?"

"I was paid 520 silvers." Ning Que very honestly replied.

No one would walk from life to death for someone they had just become acquainted with for 520 silvers. Not to mention that person was still a sixteen year-old, and a youth that had just been admitted to the Academy. Xu ChongShan didn't believe his explanation, so he didn't think that he was greedy for money, and even more felt he was truly a sentimental person, instantly finding him more pleasing to the eye.

"His Majesty likes sentimental people. I also like them." Xu ChongShan

smiled towards him and asked, "Then next I need to ask you a question, and that is.....are you willing to sacrifice your life and even your honor for the nation?"

Ning Que slightly hesitated, and frowned for a long time. On one side he was trying to guess what this high official's reason for asking was, and on the other he didn't quite understand why he used "even" in front of "honor". Could it be that honor would be even more important than life?

This question was very big and very broad, very serious and very sacred, but also made him very uncertain about the point. He thought for a long while, thinking of several of the generals around Wei City, and thought of those comrades who would share life and death together, and thought of the warm common people in ChangAn City, and slowly and seriously replied, "If it had to come to that, life can be given....."

Having said this, he suddenly thought of one of the scenes from the night before. After Chao XiaoShu reluctantly put down half a bowl of noodle soup, and looked at the distant gray wall across from the shop, he said quietly to himself, and thus hesitated to say add these words, "But some things won't do."

Xu ChongShan seriously looked at him, and discovered that the youth's reply didn't have the initial tone of lacking any hesitation of throwing the die, and was rather serious even to the point of troubled as he pondered for half the day. In regards to this point, not only was the Vice Commander not angry, but instead was extremely appreciative, because he was very clear that after going through a thought-out, cautious answer was much more trustworthy than a vehement, hot-blooded response.

"From today onwards, you are a member of my Great Tang's Imperial

Guards.”

With no more questions, and no exams, just a few lines of very simple conversation, Xu ChongShan decided to accept this youngster into the ranks of the Great Tang Palace’s Imperial Guards. Included was the factor of Chao XiaoShu’s assurance, but the even bigger reason was he really quite liked that this youth when responding, showed his temperament.

Consequently it was Ning Que’s turn to be shocked silent. He looked at the dull sheen of the ebony tablet in his hands, and looked at the symbol of status on top. After a very long silence, he said in a daze, “After fighting once, I’ve become a big inner Imperial Guard?”

“The Fish Dragon Gang was forced into the open by those moronic high ministers of the Palace. No need to look at me like that, the word ‘moron’ was His Majesty’s personal evaluation last night – so we have to once again set up new helping hands hidden in the Night Scene.”

Xu ChongShan coldly explained, “This is an honor of the people of the Tang Dynasty. Don’t think about refusing.”

“It’s not a problem of refusing or not.” Ning Que helplessly said, “The problem is, what does the Court need me to do? And what can I do? Most importantly, I’m about to partake in the entrance exam of the Academy.”

Hearing the word “academy”, Xu ChongShan’s face slightly changed, and it wasn’t for any other reason, but that as an elder of the Imperial Guards, he was very clear the things that Chao XiaoShu suffered back then – and exactly because of those memories, these days this generation

of hidden Imperial Guards don't have the treatment of those years. He had a gentle smile as he looked at Ning Que, and said, "Don't worry, if you can enter the Academy then go. After you leave the Academy, in the end isn't it still for the effectiveness of the Court? The two don't conflict."

"You still haven't said what I need to do." Ning Que persisted to ask.

"The Fish Dragon Gang has been placed in the open, but the JiangHu of ChangAn City is already without other problems." Xu ChongShan slightly frowned and said, "Your mission is very simple, that is to gather intelligence. The specific mission will be discussed later."

If the JiangHu was no longer a problem, then the biggest problem beyond Imperial power was naturally the xiuxing cultivator world. Thinking that he was about to enter the Academy, and thinking again of the Vice Commander's vague description, Ning Que very naturally thought of some possibility – did the Imperial Court want to do something to the Academy?

The Imperial Guard plaque in his hands was a bit moistened in sweat, but he knew these things wouldn't allow him to refuse, and he could only hope that someday the direction of this matter and his own imagining wouldn't be the same.

Chapter 69: Blossoms Open Transcendental Skies (Part III)

If life has to be some way for you, and you have no way to resist, then you will just let it be. If you weren't especially defiant, and were quite passive, surely it would become a lot easier. Based on this understanding, Ning Que broke from a shocked and distressed state of mind with extreme speed. He scratched his head, his gaze crossing Xu ChongShan's thick shoulders, passing through the gloomy room's window grates of the daytime guard office, and said, "Can I still ask a question?"

Xu ChongShan simply and straightforwardly replied, "If I can answer then I will."

"Why me?" Ning Que asked.

Xu ChongShan replied, "Old Chao very much admires you. He thinks that if your luck gets a little better, that your future accomplishments will even be above his own. The other reason is because of the events last night, Chang the Third and Qi the Seventh and others also regard you well.....according to rules of the Imperial Guards, no matter if they are members in the open or secret Imperial Guards, the opinions of seniors are a bit more important."

"Sir....." Ning Que covered his forehead and said, "If so many people know my identity as a secret Imperial Guard, then I would like to inquire just how to describe the word "secret" of "secret Imperial Guard"? Would you like me to go to 47th Street and light a few hanging firecrackers, and then hang two banners telling everyone in the world that I'm not up this job?"

Of course Xu ChongShan could hear the angry dissatisfaction in his voice, and slightly frowning he explained, "The Tang Dynasty is a place that has rules. Even if a noble of the Palace knows your identity, no one would dare to risk His Majesty's wrath and threaten to expose you. As for Chang the Third and the others.....you have long proved your loyalty and reliability."

Ning Que put down his arms, and shook his head saying, "Time is the only criterion to test the truth."

"They've already used more than ten years of time to prove this." Xu ChongShan said without any expression on his face, "But kid, I quite like these words. It's a pity you want to study at the Academy, and can only go down the dark path, or with Old Chao's admiration for you and these words, I have the mind to actually train you as my successor."

"I, Xu ChongShan, even though I was born in the military, I still keep some integrity – but I can't be as calm as Old Chao. Even without even knowing who you were, he dared to put his own life in your hands. In the end the Imperial Guard's concern is His Majesty's safety, so the Imperial Guards investigated your ancestors for 18 generations."

"Unfortunately when the Imperial Guard Office investigated your background, only finding that at age seven, they confirmed that you were an orphan, and couldn't investigate your ancestors. But we were very clear about your performance at the military camp at Wei City, and we very much liked it."

Xu ChongShan extended his thick palm, and heavily patted Ning Que's shoulder, saying, "Your military record with accumulated years of military merits was already enough to prove your loyalty to His Majesty and the

Tang Dynasty."

Hearing that the Imperial Guard Office had already investigated his personal information, Ning Que was not at all alarmed because he knew that in this world, besides Sang Sang and the already deceased Little Black, no one else knew who he really was.

He slowly fiddled with the slightly moist tablet in his hand, and after a moment of silence he went on to say, "According to what you said earlier, there shouldn't be anyone taking the initiative to contact me. Then if I have a situation, how do I report to you? I think in the future when we meet, it shouldn't be in the Palace right? I never imagined that this kind of thing could be done in such an open place."

"Why not?" Xu ChongShan proudly said, "The whole world doesn't have a place safer than my Tang Dynasty's Imperial Palace."

Ning Que let out a sigh, helplessly accepting reality. Then he lifted his head up, and raising his face filled with hope he said, "It's not allowed for people to know about the conferring of this honor, then I.....when do I get to see the Emperor?"

Xu ChongShan stared at him, then immediately laughed out loud, rubbing his ball-like belly. He laughed and said, "You kid.....did you think that coming to the Palace today you would see the Emperor?"

"Could it be that it isn't?"

"Age?"

"16."

"Surname?"

"Ning."

Xu ChongShan looked at him and seriously asked, "You're not a 100-year old person, and not a distant relative of the Imperial Clan. Is your reputation bigger than other people?"

Ning Que stroked his own delicate cheek reluctantly, and shook his head.

Xu ChongShan heaved a sigh, and looked at the youth while shaking his head and said, "Chang the Third and the others already haven't seen His Majesty in many years. On what basis are you entitled to have an Imperial audience by yourself?"

Ning Que was silent for a moment then seriously said, "My calligraphy is truly written pretty well. If his Majesty likes it, maybe he wouldn't be willing to have me become an Imperial Guard, and directly declare me to enter the Palace and have me as some teacher to the Emperor."

Xu ChongShan gathered a smile, and mockingly looked at him saying, "Besides Imperial Guards, the only ones who can stay in the Palace for long are eunuchs."

Ning Que's expression froze, and bit awkwardly smiled, no longer daring to continue this topic.

Xu ChongShan was the Vice Commander of the Tang Dynasty's Imperial Guards, and as expected, was very busy. Today, that he specifically took the time to spend some time alone with this youth, was already giving Chao XiaoShu face as big as the sky. After chatting about things, naturally he turned away the other party without any hesitation, then quickly hurried back to guard beside the Hall of Political Discourse.

Ning Que walked out of the empty Imperial Guard daytime office, and became worried about how he would exit the Palace – the kind like in a moment would he mistakenly enter the Imperial Study, or mistakenly enter some Spring Willow Palace Courtyard, and hear some cold Palace woman's complaints, and creating some kind of very horrible situation – or perhaps running into someone he called idiot and he even thought of Her Highness the Princess....then he saw that little eunuch that took him to the palace, standing next to him like a ghost since an unknown time.

Even though he really wanted to ask him to explain that without knowing the situation, he went into the Imperial Study and then suffered from the poisonous lure of inks and brushes as well as fear, but considering a safety perspective, he finally tightly closed his mouth, behaving himself and quietly following the little eunuch to the deserted lakeside willow pathway to the stone gate. Sitting in that cramped carriage, they passed through the laundry department galloping towards the exterior of the Palace.

Just as they were to pass the bit of Palace alley through the laundry department, Ning Que suddenly felt a sensation. His chest had a fit of tightness, and he couldn't be bothered with the severe stare of the little eunuch beside him. Lifting up a corner of the carriage curtain, he frowned

and looked outside.

His gaze penetrated heavily through the skylight of the alleys, crossing the sounds of bang boards and the smell of cassia pervading the alley; falling onto a base corner of the distant magnificent Palace. Crouching high in the light blue sky on the eaves were 8-9 decorative guardian beast statues, each with a different appearance.

He didn't know what the names of these guardian statues were, or for whom from where it was auspicious for. Staring outwards, he only felt his own chest become more and more tight, his heart thumping faster and faster as if it was about to break his ribs and jump out. And following the acceleration of his heartbeat, those distant guardian statues became more and more clear; the stone tiles weathered by wind and rain for an unknowable hundreds of years became more and more life-like, seeming as though in the next moment they would become living life forms.

He muffled a groan, covered his chest, and couldn't stop himself from remembering that rainy day he and Sang Sang first saw the image of ChangAn's Vermillion Bird. Resolutely looking towards those guardian beasts of the Imperial palace, his face became paler and paler, but he refused to divert his gaze.

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Earlier inside of the Imperial Study, a very intense argument broke out. Vice Commander of the Imperial Guards Xu ChongShan and the Interior Deputy Steward Old Sir Lin were like two statues guarding the outside of the Imperial Study – no matter what sounds they heard, they didn't dare to leak the slightest expression, because inside the deepest depths of these two important figures sat a grandson; fear, dread, doubt, and shock

had reached their apex. At the same time they felt that the person inside of the Imperial Study was truly too damn brave.

The Tang Dynasty's Sky Opening Emperor was already thirty-three, and no one had seen His Majesty the Emperor so enraged. Even after last night's Spring Wind Pavilion Incident, His Majesty merely heavily smashed a few desks and cursed 'morons' more than thirty times. But today inside of the Imperial Study, His Majesty the Emperor smashed several tea cups, and cursed many dirty words that people absolutely shouldn't hear.

"Chao XiaoShu! If you're still so unappreciative of favors, don't blame your father for disciplining you!"

"How do I deal with you? We.....We.....We.....truly don't f*cking know!"

"You foolish to the extreme fellow, why don't you even understand a bit of reasoning of the world!"

"Alright alright alright. Today I'll call you Chao Second Brother one last time. Will you stay or not!"

Inside the Imperial Study it suddenly became quiet. Xu ChongShan and Old Sir Lin beyond the door couldn't help but to turn their heads and glance at each other, confirming the shock and admiration in the eyes of the other of someone not at all like the two of them. With extreme understanding they again turned their heads and wordlessly looked at the flowers and trees.

Inside it was silent for a long time, then echoed with Chao XiaoShu's calm and mild but extremely firm voice.

"I'm not staying."

There was an oppressive banging sound, that should be that Tang Dynasty His Majesty the Emperor throwing and shattering his most cherished Yellow Province deep-clay inkstone. Xu ChongShan and Old Sir Lin guarding beyond the door had no way of maintaining silence – especially Xu ChongShan who was absolutely worried that in a fit of rage His Majesty would make a decision that he would certainly regret, scrambling two steps forwards preparing to knock on the door and admonish him.

Just in this moment the doors to the Imperial Study were pushed open with a screech, and Chao XiaoShu in a set of blue robes calmly crossed the entrance and walked out. Waiting for the doors behind him to once again close, he then turned his body, lifting his long lapel, and with both knees knelt on the ground. Extremely solemnly and seriously he kowtowed three times, performing the ritual of a minister that will no longer see his king.

Afterwards he got up, and with a slight smile he cupped his hands to Xu ChongShan and Old Sir Lin, and left the Imperial Study to go outside of the Palace. Beside him, no eunuchs or Palace maids led the way, and just like this he alone slowly walked just as though he was touring the gardens. Ten years ago he would come to this Imperial Palace many times, and felt very deeply that these past years he had come much less to the Imperial Palace; it was very nostalgic.

Walking nearly to the big lake called the Li Sea, Chao XiaoShu was

pensive. After folding his hands behind his blue robes, he calmly looked at the lake, watching the golden carp happily swimming about. Suddenly the corners of his lips slightly rose, bursting with a fresh smile like sunlight penetrating the shade of the willows.

He gazed outwards keeping his calm smile – those golden carp happily swimming about suddenly froze, unexpectedly becoming completely still as though they were jade fish suspended in the sparkling clear green waves – with overflowing life but completely without a sign of life.

Chao XiaoShu mumbled aloud, “Long caged within, returning back to naturalness.”

Heaven and earth were a cage for man within, the body was a cage for the mind within; to break the cage of the mind, the cage of heaven and earth itself will also break.

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Inside of the Imperial Study, the Golden Crown was carelessly tossed aside into a corner of discarded firewood. The Tang Dynasty’s Emperor angrily stared at the ‘Leaping Fish in the Current Seas’ that he personally wrote in the early hours before dawn, his face full of aversion and regret.

He didn’t know that in a corner of the bookshelf, someone secretly continued the poem for him and wrote “Blossoms Open Transcendental Skies”.

In a sudden instant he looked up. Separated by the window he looked

towards the Imperial gardens, his brow slowly creased up and then slowly eased open, finally becoming calm and relieved. Then lightly disparaging himself he said, "Maybe you're really right."

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Somewhere within the Palace, a Daoist around forty years old was taking the pulse of the Empress Mother, then all of a sudden his brow violently jumped and his finger extremely rudely scratched a mark on the Empress Mother's ample wrist, blankly turning his head and gazing behind him.

The Empress Mother slightly frowned and was wondering that the State Master was usually so calm, why would he lose his composure like this?

The Daoist stared at that place – suddenly very remorsefully he cried out, "I was wrong. I was truly wrong. Back then I should've persuaded His Majesty to let XiaoShu leave earlier, or simply let him enter the Academy....."

"With Master's ability, with XiaoShu's perception and mental state, in these years my Tang Dynasty would inevitably have had yet another exceptional power, such that maybe he could even fight against that South Jin fellow. A pity, a pity, a pity it had to be callously ten years late!"

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In some alley in the laundry department, Ning Que sat inside of a carriage stubbornly staring at several statues of guardian statue beasts

that seemed like they were going to come to life – his complexion became paler and paler, his heart beat faster and faster. Suddenly all sensations disappeared.

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The Imperial Palace's Vermillion Bird Gate.

A middle-aged man turned his head towards a corner of the eaves of the main hall at those stone beasts, erupting into laughter. The sound of his laughter was exceptionally natural, free and cheerful, without a trace of other thoughts or ideas. The guardian beasts seemed to have understood the intent his laughing conveyed, and once again calmness and serenity returned.

Amidst the calm and free laughter, his blue robes fluttered as he walked out of the Imperial City's Main Gate.

After today, ChangAn City would be lacking that person called the leader, Spring Wind Pavilion's Old Chao.

This world would gain a Guan HuYu, a power that entered the Fate-seeker Realm.

Chapter 70: The Long Street of Farewells

Having returned to 47th street and pushed open the door of the Old Brush House, Ning Que took out the dull lustrous ebony tablet from his breast pocket, and very casually threw it like a piece of firewood on top of the bed.

Sang Sang was sitting on the bed, shivering with her two cold feet wrapped in blankets while concentrating on mending his old jacket. Glancing at the tablet on top of the blanket, she curiously picked it up. Holding it to a ray of light spilling from an open tile in the roof and squinting her eyes; looking at it for a long time carefully, she asked, "Master, what is this?"

"A tablet of a Great Imperial Guard of the Interior....Secret Imperial Guard. The type that can't see light." Ning Que sat down beside the table, lifting a kettle and pouring out several big mouthfuls. Thinking that today he didn't even have a sip of water when entering the Palace, unavoidably he felt a bit gloomy.

Knowing that Ning Que had the status of an official, with the decision last night of hanging on the thickest thigh in the world, Sang Sang squinted her two willow leaf eyes and happily laughed, but her focus on things she cared about was always rather direct.

"What's the monthly salary?"

Ning Que stared blankly, putting down the kettle in his hands recalling the previous conversation, and with hesitation he said, "No matter what it should be forty or fifty silvers right?"

Sang Sang scrunched up her brow, her dark little face was full of discontent. "I hadn't imagined it would be so much."

Ning Que shook his head smiling and with an air of lecturing said, "Now we have a net worth of two thousand silvers. From now on we speak with a little more gravity."

Sang Sang heard these words, and the discontent in her face instantly disappeared without a trace, and smiling jubilantly she clasped her little hands together and said, "Master previously when you left, the other side quietly sent the silver over."

Ning Que was a bit puzzled. Walking straight beside the little maid at an angle, he curiously asked, "Where did you put it?"

Sang Sang discreetly glanced outside. After putting down the needlework in her hands, and using her two little hands to grasp two corners of the blankets around her feet she then, a bit nervously, pulled open a slit. With a slight nod of her chin she indicated for him to look inside.

Ning Que's brow slightly twitched. With a bit of disbelief he looked inside of the blankets, and could only see that beside Sang Sang's thin legs, there was actually a bag of tightly packed silver. Even though it was covered with thick blankets, with just the extremely dim light, the dazzling shine of silver could be seen.

With his mouth slightly agape, and forcefully suppressing the excitement in his heart, strongly feigning calm he lectured, "I had already

said.....ahem ahem.....we'll carry more weight, with exactly these two thousand silvers. Seeing you so excited and nervous.....I felt something was wrong. What were you doing nestled on the bed in the middle of the day? So it turns out you were worried about this – could it be that you don't feel the silver is poking painfully?"

Sang Sang raised her little face and looked at him, and very firmly and seriously shook her head, indicating that this type of thing called silver doesn't hurt people one bit.

Ning Que coughed twice again, and rubbing his little maid's head affectionately he said, "Two thousand two hundred silvers can still be covered up by one bed and one blanket. In the future when your master earns millions, at that time what would you do?"

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Spring weather in ChangAn was very beautiful. From time to time a rush of spring rain would fall, filling all the streets and alleys, and sprouting the green leaves and tender blossoms. Whether you stood at the doorway or were at a pavilion, you could see sights of the color of life. In East City at 47th Street it seemed as if the colors of life were becoming denser and denser, all coming alive; flourishing gradually appearing.

After the Spring Wind Pavilion Incident, ministers of departments were demoted. The purged Department of Transportation was purged from top to bottom into emptiness, disrupting a good many months of matters of land appropriation that naturally nothing came out of. On the other side of the wall, the enclosed purged Department of Transportation's storeroom was in a deathly stillness like a great mausoleum. Even though the Fish Dragon Gang was forced into the public view, they still didn't

forget to take advantage of taming the Night Scene. This time no one dared to touch this street of Chao XiaoShu's, and didn't even dare to glance at it.

It was fundamentally a good location, a wonderful spot for a peddler, and quiet amidst the bustle. Nowadays without pressure from the government and the discouragement from dark forces, those tightly locked shop doors naturally once again opened. Whether they were new bosses taking over, or an old boss who saw an opportunity and quickly bought it back to rent out, they all rolled up their sleeves, using these warm spring days to prepare for a flurry of big endeavors.

The business industry was an industry of people, and aesthetic was exactly what would amass a rich atmosphere of the flow of people. In days of the past, 47th street only had one shop open, half-dead with bones showing in declining health. Naturally no one had a reason to come by, and business was very poor. Nowadays, all of the shops on the street were open. Under the spring trees, liveliness was soaring, and naturally the flow of people would come gathering.

Compared to the shop next door, the business of the Old Brush House still wasn't considered extremely good, but compared to the period of stark autumn of new businesses, it was better by an unknowable amount. Everyday Sang Sang was extremely busy, with more and more smiles on her little face, and she insisted that her master not hire more helpers.

As for Ning Que, from his bones he still had a bit of a scholarly youth's sourness. Seeing the liveliness before him, and thinking of the former starkness, he viewed the customers buying calligraphy with more displeasure. Today with more than two thousand two hundred silvers at hand, how could he still take the income of the Old Brush House seriously? Thus he simply raised the prices higher and higher by a large

margin. In his view, since now they weren't short of money, if you all come visit to buy for cheap, then naturally you must pay a bit more silver, such that it can be worthwhile for myself. Only then could I spit out the angry resentment from days past.

However, the situation developed beyond what he imagined – the price of calligraphy rose and rose, finally rising to five times when they first opened. But who would've thought that there would be more and more customers coming to buy calligraphy? Even though the Old Brush House's reputation was still a late-comer success in ChangAn City, but within a small vicinity of East City, it was already considered a brand.

"So it should be played like this?"

Ning Que was holding a small tea pot and leaning on the doorway and sizing up the guests in the shop, while pleasantly sipping two sips of tea – and listening to the sounds of an argument in a newly opened nearby fake antique shop, thinking that life was truly damn good.

What the bosses of the street shops didn't know was that for 47th Street to come to life again, was due to the connection of that young boss of the Old Brush House and them being able to earn plates and bowls full of money. They didn't know that if it wasn't for Ning Que helping Chao XiaoShu that rainy spring night of killing in all directions, this street would still be as deathly still as before. Today in their eyes, the young boss of the Old Brush House was just merely useless garbage that couldn't earn money and could only enslave a maid.

Business was good, and more silver was earned. The people naturally easily became happy, but it could also easily give birth to some new problems. Thinking while well-fed and warm, and that today business

happened to be good for four or five days, that fake antique shop boss had the intention to take a concubine. Today this deed caused an intense argument, precisely starting a big fight over this matter between this boss and his main wife.

"Relying on your looks, you actually have the gall to want a concubine?"

"Why am I not good enough?"

"Mom says you're not good enough, then you're not good enough. If you want to force me, then I'll sue you in ChangAn court!"

"Empress Mother wouldn't even care about this matter! Why would ChangAn's government care! Ning Que that kid can even have a little maid, and you want to kick me out of bed everyday. What's wrong with dad wanting some warm feet!"

"You want me to give you warm feet? There aren't any even at the Vermilion Bird Gate! Unless that kid Ning Que becomes the Emperor!"

"He's not even named Li! Where would he be the Emperor of!"

"Moon Kingdom (Yue Lun Kingdom), South Jin (Nan Jin), Great River (Da He), as long as the world has it, he can become the Emperor of wherever country he wants!"

Ning Que held onto a teapot pleasantly sipping tea, listening in a corner with great interest, while secretly praising that the people of my Tang Dynasty are brave, as open minded as this; in an argument they actually

dared to mention the matter of the Imperial Throne. Suddenly his expression became stiff, only now did he understand that this argument actually mentioned him, and he couldn't help but to feel a bit annoyed.

Just in this moment, the customers of the shop scattered and left. Sang Sang was amidst tidying the furnishings atop the table, and he angrily charged inside and shouted, "There isn't a single day that goes by, that that couple actually used me in their argument, and even absurdly dared to talk about politics of their own Court. Are they treating me, an Imperial Guard as dead? Tomorrow I'll enter the Palace and report them, and get their whole family executed!"

These words weren't false, he had a Secret Imperial Guard tablet, and it was originally for the duty of investigating the sentiments of the people of the Empire on behalf of the Court; and in a neighborhood within the city there was someone talking about the Imperial Throne, of course he could report to the higher-ups – just that even though the Tang Dynasty's laws were harsh, the theories of governance for the people were extremely relaxed. These words of a small argument between husband and wife were in the heat of anger. Without even mentioning the Imperial Guards, even if the case was handed before His Majesty the Emperor, it'll probably only cause those nobles to laugh.

Sang Sang on the contrary thought of her own worries these past few days, and knitting her thin eyebrows she asked, "Master, when we were little you told me a story that being a spy would always lead to a miserable death. Now you're a Secret Imperial Guard. Wouldn't that be troublesome?"

Ning Que put down the teapot, and shook his head saying, "Even though that's a tablet that can't see the light, but by itself it's just an insignificant little role. Who would suspect my identity? Further, if after

today there really are troubles, then couldn't I just escape?"

After a short pause, he looked at Sang Sang and softly explained, "I accepted this identity also for another reason. In the future if I really have to go investigate those matters, and kill those people – having a great Secret Imperial Guard identity will always be a little more convenient."

Sang Sang was originally a little maid too lazy to think about things. Hearing his explanation she felt it was logical and thought no more of it, and said, "The umbrella cover, the blade sheath and the overcoat are done. Master, when are you going to kill that second person?"

"How's the blade? Does it need to be resharpened?" Ning Que asked.

Sang Sang seriously replied, "Even if it was to kill a pig, there will definitely be a problem killing more than ten. Of course it needs sharpening."

This dialogue between the pair of master and servant always skipped along swiftly – between them they would absolutely have no obstacles of communication, with especially calm and normal expressions on their faces. If some outsider heard, they absolutely wouldn't think that they were talking about the damage of that man-slaying blade on that rainy spring night, and the bloody affair of going to kill people yet again.

Just in this moment, at that end of 47th Street, there was a burst of loud talking voices, and there was a crowd flooding from that direction over. Ning Que curiously walked to the shop door, and glanced over at that side, and the expression on his face slightly changed.

He could only see a group of blue shirt, blue pants, and blue booted men in an enveloping protective formation, and that calm and casual middle-aged man in a whole outfit of blue clothing, cupping his hands and talking to the bosses of the shops. His face wrought with a gentle smile; from time to time cupping his hands, talking and smiling, for the most part saying I'm going through, bosses please relax and go about your business, if there are problems use subordinates as much as possible to handle it.

After the middle-aged man's explanation, the five or six silent men standing behind him cupped their hands in propriety.

That blue-robed middle-aged man went in front of every shop and stayed for a bit, saying a few words, and seemed extremely patient – the group of underlings behind him followed his slow stroll, gradually moving along the street to this end.

On this side of the street there was a shop selling calligraphy called the Old Brush House.

Chapter 71: The Academy

In Old Chao of Spring Wind Pavilion's hands, he possessed an unknowable amount of streets of shops like this 47th Street and in his former days, he had exchanges an unknowable amount of times with ruthless high officials. It seemed that this group of people wanted to leave ChangAn City, and he wanted to say goodbye to his partner that absolutely shouldn't be a shop boss on 47th Street. But today before he left, he especially came to 47th Street, and gave a word of farewell to the bosses of the street. If it was from the perspective of those high nobles of the Empire, they would probably think that this middle-aged man was relaying that this street led to the Spring Wind Pavilion Incident, and making a clear message: After I leave, don't you recklessly come.

But Ning Que was definitely sure that that wasn't the real reason he came to 47th Street – he wanted to come to say farewell to him, for that one time they fought side by side in that rainy spring night, to say goodbye to a comrade that he ate fried egg and noodles with side by side. Only because Ning Que wanted to hide his identity that nowadays he was a Secret Imperial Guard of the Palace, so this man would go to every shop boss and patiently speak a farewell, so as to have the person he was intending for in ChangAn City notice his presence.

With this in mind, even though Ning Que himself felt cold and indifferent, he couldn't help but to feel gentleness and warmth in his chest. Seeing this blue-robed, middle-aged man with a smile come closer and closer in the heart and center of a crowd, he didn't quite know how to handle it.

Arriving to the entrance of the Old Brush House, Chao XiaoShu looked

at the youth and the little maid inside the shop and smiled. Clasp ing his hands in propriety he said, "Boss Ning Que, greetings."

Ning Que looked at the shop entrance being crammed shut with the lively crowd surrounding outside, and with a smirk, he mimicked his performance returning the clasped hands, and harmoniously said, "Greetings Chao Second Brother."

These three words 'Chao Second Brother' were heard from Vice Commander Xu ChongShan. He felt that this way of addressing him was both close and respected, extremely fitting. Unexpectedly it made Chao XiaoShu slightly hesitate, then show a difficult to restrain laugh, those several imposing mannered men standing behind Chao XiaoShu further shook their heads repeatedly, their gazes looking at this Ning Que couldn't help but to have some well-intentioned ridicule – everyone in ChangAn City addressed Chao XiaoShu as Spring Wind Pavilion's Old Chao. Brothers in the Fish Dragon Gang addressed him as Leader or Big Brother; the people who knew the means of address 'Chao Second Brother' were extremely few. Ning Que had unknowingly leaked a secret.

"I'm about to leave ChangAn City, so I brought all of the brothers in the gang to come see all the bosses. Boss Ning, in the future if you have any inconveniences, you can go look for them. Of course I believe Boss Ning will only carefully manage, inevitably will have wonderful success, and rise to fly like a cloud in clear skies. By then please don't forget the help of my brothers and I."

Chao XiaoShu smiled to him as he spoke, his right hand pointing at the imposing men behind him, and said, "Qi the Fourth you have already met. They are Chang the Third, Liu the Fifth, Fei the Sixth and Chen the Seventh, all brothers I trust in."

The so-called careful management would inevitably become like a soaring cloud in clear skies, Chao XiaoShu had also said in other shops, but saying this to Ning Que, naturally was hiding another meaning. Ning Que heard and understood, those people at the entrance of the Old Brush House also heard and understood. Chang the Third, Liu the Fifth and the others each glanced at each other, seeing the surprise in each other's eyes. Then taking a step forward, they silently saluted towards Ning Que.

They knew what happened in that rainy spring night, and they already had an extremely high opinion of Ning Que whom they had never seen before. At the same time they knew Chao XiaoShu gauged this youth extremely highly, just that they hadn't thought that it would actually be so high – even such that he faintly showed the tone of serious trust.

Chang SiWei looked at Ning Que and mildly said, "Boss Ning, in the future you inevitably will have trouble coming to bother you."

After the conversation in the Palace last night, Ning Que of today already understood that these men in front of him were all Secret Imperial Guards sprinkled among the people by His Majesty the Emperor. With his current understanding of his identity, perhaps in the next few days he would once again enter the Palace to serve. He naturally wouldn't be neglectful – just that hearing these words, he constantly felt like something was wrong.

Chang the Third 'Cold', Qi the Fourth 'Ruthless', Liu the Fifth 'Wild', Fei the Sixth 'Fierce', Chen the Seventh 'Dark' – this was the assessment of the several generals of the Fish Dragon Gang within the streets and markets of ChangAn. But seeing Chang SiWei's moderate expression,

Ning Que couldn't help but to link him and the word 'cold' together, and further hadn't thought that this man had already figured out his own deeply covered plans inside.

Since they were deceiving the eyes and ears of people, Chao XiaoShu and the crowd naturally couldn't stay too long inside of the Old Brush House – it would show significance. But they freely spoke several natural and normal words, then Chao XiaoShu looked at Ning Que smiling, and spoke two words.

"I'm leaving."

Another spell of the pitter patter of spring rain came, thin and gentle. Very many people were too lazy to even wear a rain hat. Ning Que stood silently at the opening of 47th Street, watching those gradually distancing figures; seeing that middle-aged man's back just as calm as before, and suddenly he felt a little regret from his heart.

"In this brotherhood thing, of course it needs to rely on time to prove it. You say to be brothers and I'll just agree to be your brother – then isn't that giving me too little face? I originally thought that after a few more years, if it was good, it wouldn't hurt to be your brother, but now after slapping your butt you're leaving, and the result is playing me and making me lose face."

Ning Que shook his head, and sighed. Turning around, he took Sang Sang's little hand and walked into the middle of the road. Beside them, several branches of peach blossoms stretched out from the top of the street wall, unknown as to when they were cut into pieces by the spring rain, fallen withered onto the limestone tiles.

The tiles of the city gate had the same withered stamens. Beside some wine storeroom, Chao XiaoShu and his brothers sworn to live and die together, drank beneath the peach blossoms, drinking several cups before bidding farewell.

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The spring rain came again and again. The person they were just acquainted with or just reunited with, who had just left and been parted by death – the youth who had come from Wei City and his little maid had unknowingly spent their first month in the capital of the Empire. Then he finally met the most important day of his life; if those instances of life and death weren't included that is.

Today the Academy began the term. That's right, indeed the Academy began the term. Because the Academy's first day was also the entrance exam, to be able to pass the exam, one could then become one of the glorious Academy's students. And for the candidates who could not pass the entrance exam, they would see the majestic opening ceremony, and see the true appearance of the Academy. Surely the memory of this would become unforgettable in their whole life afterwards, as some consolation.

Early in the morning at five, Ning Que and Sang Sang got up, started washing up, getting dressed, and eating breakfast. The beginning of the term for the entire Tang Empire was a big event that everyone's eyes in the whole world would be watching. To the people of ChangAn City, it was an even more long-awaited day. Every kind of little peddler shifted trading to an earlier date, thus the master and servant very luckily were able to eat hot and sour noodle soup.

Ning Que yawned incessantly, rubbing his somewhat stinging eyes. Clearly he didn't sleep well last night. Sang Sang was propping up her even darker eye circles, even darker than her skin. Seeing her appearance she was even more nervous than her master by several margins.

The Department of Rites had a special carriage for picking up candidates, but because Ning Que wanted to take Sang Sang along, they chose to go by themselves in a carriage. Carriage renters knew this customer's identity, and didn't dare to be neglectful – by midnight they were already on standby at the street entrance, so the master and servant left the Old Brush House, and immediately set off moving southward.

In East City it was still good, but once they entered South City it became very difficult to move an inch. Currently it was the darkness of dawn; the vast Vermillion Bird main street appeared a bit dark, packed tightly with hundreds of carriages. A light rain was falling from the sky, dampening the innumerable numbers of wheels on the limestone tiles as they moved, and many horses stepped angrily in the rainwater.

The shuttle for candidates of the Department of Rites was allowed to pass first. Carrying a certificate, it entered the exam hall at the direction of the military at the city gates, and with difficulty, it squeezed a desperate path through. Following the drum tower it dashed through the Vermilion Bird Gateway becoming a long dragon. Today the candidates of ChangAn City were the most important people; those carriages of various officials participating in the opening ceremony and even the Imperial Clan's noble relatives, were all pushed aside. As for those rich merchants and scholars that were able to buy admission tickets to watch the liveliness, they were further unceremoniously shuffled to the back.

Candidates were more important than officials, more important than those merchants that could bring more taxes to the Empire. This appeared to be quite unimaginable, but it was the reality, and seeing the quiet of those luxurious carriages, and their entourages with expressions like Chang, it could be imagined that for countless years past, the opening ceremony of the Academy was always like this.

Ning Que and Sang Sang sitting within a carriage would from time to time, lift the carriage curtain and look at the surrounding activity, and their rather nervous and anxious moods gradually calmed down. When the carriage finally went through ChangAn City's South Gate, following along the spacious official road towards the South, heading towards that high, extremely tall mountain in the clouds, they even had the mind to appreciate the scenery.

The spring rain was still falling from time to time, but that sudden tall mountain rising out from the plains of the Wei River wasn't the slightest bit affected, because in front, the peak of the mountain was clear and bright because the peak was even higher than the rain clouds. The rising sun shed radiance reflected by the mountain cliffs, spilling rays of light onto the world, giving a very warm feeling.

The carriage traveled in the drizzling rain towards the peak beneath the rising sun in front of them, Ning Que's mood suddenly became extremely calm. Without knowing why, he felt that that place had something very interesting to himself; some kind of hint of something that he very much liked.

The south of ChangAn, underneath a great mountain was the Academy.

Precisely that which had stood for thousands of years of wind and rain,

that had along didn't have a name; with a history even longer than the Tang Empire, that had trained countless previous great ministers for the Tang Empire and the world, the Academy that was not at all mystical, but nearly divine.

And was also exactly where after countless hardships, the place where Ning Que absolutely wanted to go.

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A nameless great mountain, suddenly rising from between plains and rivers, directly charging into the enveloping sky.

A nameless academy, silently appearing during troubled times of the world of mortals, towering for eternity.

Dozens of wagons arrived at the foot of the mountain in succession, and those discussions and laughter inside of the carriages came to an abrupt halt. Previously the students who had come hadn't felt any kind of oppressive atmosphere, and because of the respect in their hearts, they absolutely had to become silent.

Under the clear and elegant rays of the sun, the area under the mountain was extremely large, with green-green grass gradually sloping into hills, fluctuating like a frozen ocean wave, and green grass with rubella shrubs like a painting. Within the painting was a view of more than ten complex crisscrossing carriageways. The roads were separated on the sides by several trunks of flowering trees planted a distance away. In the center of the meadow were even more whitish and pinkish flowering trees, unknowable as to whether they were apricot or peach-

colored, and not at all managed but still extremely beautifully spread on the hillside, beautiful and elegant to the uttermost.

Next the window, Ning Que and Sang Sang looked at this wonderland of the world, looking at those not at all tall, black and white buildings stretching on for an unknowable length on the grassy slope, they couldn't help but to be a bit entranced. After a long period of silence, he turned his head towards Sang Sang and extremely seriously said, "I definitely have to get into the Academy!"

Sang Sang looked up with her worried little face and looked at him, and said, "Master, the several topics for the entrance exam.....did you finish them yet?"

Ning Que was silent for a long time. After a while he choked out one thing with annoyance, "Auspicious words! You kid, don't you know what's called auspicious words!"

Chapter 72: That Year's Spring, I Cut the Peach Blossoms (Part 1)

Near the Academy into the meadow, only then could it be discovered that the soft and powdery flowering trees were not of a single type. Today most blossoms were apricots, but the trees were still mostly peach. Those first light peach blossoms hiding behind the apricot blossoms, raised their little faces to look at these people coming to disturb their peace, full of shyness.

Sang Sang turned her little face upwards, curiously climbing on Ning Que's shoulders to look outside of the window. Watching the Academy coming closer and closer, and watching that great mountain mostly covered by clouds and mist behind the Academy, she discovered that she didn't have any kind of uncomfortable feeling, and her thin little willow eyes smiled into a squint, full of happiness.

The student candidates waiting for the exam got out of their carriages successively, and were directed to line up under the guidance of the official of the Department of Rites and the Academy instructors at a large stony plain.

The students waiting for the exam came from different places. Most were personally selected by instructors from every village and town in the Great Tang Empire; the remainder were selected from every department; among these, the Department of the Military selected 70 prospective exam candidates. The amount of people was very large. But with as many students sitting on two sides of a stone rain veranda, unexpectedly it wasn't the slightest bit crowded – it could be imagined just how wide the place was.

Above the stony plain was the main building of the Academy, hidden within flowering trees and light mist. But because the building itself was extremely large, the two slanted corridors were like the wings of a phoenix, and so had none of the sense of an obscure wallflower. Instead it had a kind of indescribable, indistinct kind of clear, cheerful flavor, appearing extremely grand.

At the moment, Ning Que's concern wasn't the appearance of the Academy. If he could be admitted into the Academy, in the future he could have several years to use his two eyes and his two feet to size up the beauty of the Academy – what he was more worried about at the moment, was that at the moment within the rain veranda, there were already more than five hundred examinees, and the Academy will only admit two hundred. Two out of five was not a very high ratio, and he couldn't help but to be a bit anxious.

Each of the student examinees under the rain veranda had calm expressions, neither talking nor chatting to the left and right, and neither did anyone pull out their examination theses from their chests for a last minute rush. Everyone was the most talented youths of the Tang Empire and even the world – indeed, although within this group there were military officers over 30 years old, born into a frontier fortress with faces full of bitter cold and hardships, there were also 14 year-old child geniuses taught in some rural countryside brought back to ChangAn with their faces full of restless immaturity, but overall they could all be considered young. No one at the moment was willing to show that they did not have enough confidence.

Ning Que's confidence became more and more insufficient. His right hand slightly trembled, and several times he was prepared to stretch out his hand towards Sang Sang and wrap up the exam questions, but he forced his hand back. Just when he was finally about to crack, even if he

didn't care about face he wanted to do what he was expert at – the blade portion. Suddenly all around the stone plain sounded with a majestic gong sound.

The Yu Lin Army had come, the ceremonial parade had come, the officials from every department had arrived, and the spectators who spent money to buy tickets had come; the Palace's Guards had come, His Highness the Prince had come, the Queen Mother had come, and His Majesty the Emperor had come. Consequently after a long while of excitement, the student examinees in the rain veranda sat down with a bit of fatigue, cupping their hands in propriety and along the hillside, "Long live the Emperor" was called out twice, and then there was no longer time for bitter studying. Ah? Ning Que became extremely talkative inside, suddenly seeing a clear and elegant person walking across the stone plain, luxurious clothing, her temperament calm and lady-like – if it wasn't Her Highness the Princess, who was it?

The Tang Dynasty's Fourth Princess Li Yu was surrounded by eunuchs and Palace nannies, slowly walking on the stone plain. When she walked past the rain veranda, young, unmarried students looked with passionate, admiring eyes. When she walked past the ministers broke into whispering discussions with hard-to-hide shock in their gazes. Walking along the long, long phoenix wing corridor to the main entrance of the Academy, arriving to the stone railing of the path, she made a slight curtsy to His Majesty the Emperor and the Empress Mother, then calmly she stood beside His Majesty the Emperor's left hand.

Unlike the enemies of those nations and in the rest of the world who harbored no good intentions, and unlike the conspiracies and paranoia that Ning Que imagined – within the Tang Dynasty there wasn't the situation of Imperial power opposing the Academy. Only a few people knew that the current Tang Dynasty Emperor had once hid his identity

and studied at the Academy for two years, and after he ascended the throne, no matter if it was a big or small festival, he would come to the Academy for a little rest. When it became winter, he might even stay for a whole month within the Academy.

If the Tang Dynasty's Imperial power was truly vaguely fearful such that it wanted to balance the power of the Academy, then the moment the Academy began the term, the Imperial Court wouldn't have put out such a big show, and that Emperor further wouldn't make this place like a second home.

All the ministers of the Court knew His Majesty's feelings towards the Academy, and knew that each time the Academy began the term, it was very important towards His Majesty. So when they again saw the Fourth Princess Li Yu, it was hard to suppress the shock and spurts of alarm – they gazed at the distant, high, railed side, and looked at the women standing on the left and right of His Majesty, and inside they couldn't help but to be filled with complications to the extreme. It hadn't even been a month that the Fourth Princess returned from the Plains, showing the world that she received incomparable favor. Without knowing when the Empress Mother quietly stood beside His Majesty, in this very moment what was she thinking?

The bell behind the mountain sounded by a sharp strike – it was the first summons of the Academy's entrance exam. Under the direction of the Instructors of the Academy, hundreds of student examinees filed out of the rain veranda, walking past a flat road beneath the railing of the Academy's main building, heading inside of the courtyard.

The Tang Dynasty Emperor watched those handsome and suave students entering one after another under his watchful eye, and he couldn't help but to stroke his thin beard, showing a satisfied and happy

smile.

Watching her father's expression, the Fourth Princess Li Yu said with a smile, "Congratulations Imperial Father, the world's heroes have joined you."

The Tang Emperor heard these words and laughed loudly; he didn't approve but didn't disagree.

The Empress Mother didn't say anything, only turning her face towards her husband with a faint smile, her eyes full of admiration and affection. Her full, soft right hand on top of his hand gently joined, showing encouragement.

His Majesty the Emperor looked at the women of his family beside him, great ministers on both sides, countless future pillars of the state, and couldn't help but to feel great satisfaction. Suddenly he felt that beside him seemed to be missing one person, his brow slightly frowned, and to a high minister behind him he asked, "Master.....still wouldn't come?"

That high minister frantically clasped his hands and said, "The dean said that the entrance exam was for His Majesty, for the Empire to select talents, he.....didn't need to come, he had to prepare his luggage, after two days he has to leave."

His Majesty the Emperor only now thought of this. With a face full of regrets as though a child having done something good, but not receiving a father's approval, and with a sigh and a soft clap on the stone railing, he said, "I nearly forgot, this year Master traveling from the country is a bit earlier than before."

He turned and glanced at that great mountain behind the Academy sitting in mist and clouds, at times appearing and disappearing, and then silent for a while he prayed.

At the base of the great mountain, there were about ten dirt roads from somewhere leading to this pavilion, where a monk and a Daoist were having tea and chatting. It was early morning, and it was unknown where they got such a good mood.

The monk was around thirty years old, his appearance handsome and peaceful, naturally showing the meaning of purifying dust. His eyes fell on the vertical and horizontal lines of the chessboard, then afterwards, lifting his head towards that distant mountain and Academy, suddenly he spoke up and asked, "I heard.....Master was very high."

That Daoist that was normally solemn, today he appeared extremely frivolous and negligent, stretching his hand out and gently shooting in the sky he replied, "Master.....of course is extremely high."

"How high?"

"How would some little guy like me know?"

"Even the Great Tang Dynasty's State Master doesn't know?"

"You're the Tang Dynasty's Imperial younger Brother, and you also don't know?"

That Year's Spring, I Cut the Peach Blossoms (Part 2)

Just in this moment Ning Que was staring at a man, staring with great seriousness, and staring unscrupulously. He was one of several hundreds of examinees, and that man standing in front of hundreds of examinees was speaking – at first to welcome several hundred with an admiring gaze such that he even had burning eyes, so he wasn't worried he would be discovered by that man. And just like this staring dead on, as though to consume him with his pupils as inky as the deep night, wanting to consume that man into his memories as inky as the deep night.

That man was wearing cuffs and a lapel that were all red, but the robes were mostly black dark clothes with gold stitch work. With a handsome face, and two eyebrows like swords, thin lips and a straight nose, his smile was very amiable. When he smiled the corners of his eyes would have several wrinkles – towards the view of elders, he could be said to be already forty years old, towards the view of the younger, it could be said he was about to turn thirty. In all, it could be said that this was a very charming man.

He was Li PeiYan, the second most powerful man in the Tang Empire, and His Majesty the Emperor's sole sibling. His Highness the Prince who always had a good reputation, and it was also he who thirteen years ago, while His Majesty was by chance traveling the Great Lake and combining several important departments and offices, joined with the great general Xiahou, and had the XuanWei General Lin GuangYuan imprisoned for treason, and had all of the accused general's household executed.

Since the first year of the Sky Opening reign and fleeing ChangAn City, to this year returning back home from Wei City, there were fully thirteen years in between. Ning Que struggled painfully to live in the world, and

his hatred never stopped and never weakened. Instead because those blades in the past had split blood flows, his mind and body had suffered from those past life and death confrontations that hid the self-blame and guilt in the depths of his innermost heart, becoming more and more concentrated and more and more distinct.

There were a lot of people he absolutely had to kill in ChangAn City, and Prince PeiYan was without question the first on the list. Today at the Academy was the first time he could see the counterpart he must kill, so he watched with exceptional seriousness, wanting to put this handsome, elegant and graceful Royal Lord's appearance baked into his brain – memorize his brow, memorize his eyes, memorize the corners of his eyes when he smiles, and memorize the appearance of how his thin lips spread when he spoke; then some time in the future, he would tear up everything.

Prince Li PeiYan smiled gently and advised like a spring breeze, "All of you young folk are the world's outstanding talents. Today you must bring out your very best to deal with this entrance exam, but please do not be too nervous – entering the Academy requires even more hard study. After you've finished studies, my Tang Empire will have countless positions quietly waiting, waiting to have all of you add glory to the Empire."

Ning Que stared at him. Lightly blinking, his eyelashes severing the spring breeze.

Prince PeiYan turned towards the left side, looking at the differing clothing of the Tang examinees, and opening both arms he brightly smiled, as though brimming with sunlight, "Even though not everyone is of the Tang people, but my Tang Academy has always taught regardless of background. Please do not worry about the fairness of admission – and if everyone is successful in their schoolwork at the Academy, my Tang

Dynasty will still wait quietly for your service.”

Ning Que stared at him, his eyes dark and cold, his pupils darkening the daytime.

The focus could be understood as scorching – enmity only needed two different shades of dilution to be understood as awe. The students waiting outside of the Academy watched His Highness the Prince counseling his subordinates before the exam, and showing this look was very easy for people to understand, so nobody else discovered Ning Que’s strangeness. Only Sang Sang raised her little face and glanced at him anxiously, then stretched out her hand, touching and gently holding his slightly trembling and shaking hand.

At that moment an examinee from the Yan Kingdom aroused enough courage to exchange a few words with the Tang Prince. Without knowing what kind of joke His Highness the Prince said, it caused the initially extremely nervous examinees at the scene to laugh. Li PeiYan took the opportunity to say some other interesting stories with a smile, intending to have all the students relax a bit. The crowd of examinees also reciprocated, no longer with the previous quiet somber appearance. The ones who usually rub their hands rubbed, and the ones who usually rub their backs, rubbed their backs; the ones who usually chat chatted, and the ones who usually praise.....praised.

“The Tang Dynasty indeed has an honorable prince.”

“His Highness the Honorable Prince, is truly like the rumors, and appears as a bright and sunny amiable person.”

"Honorable."

The examinees were not necessarily all flattering him, but hearing all the words sounding from nearby were of this kind, Ning Que couldn't help but to lower his head and slightly knit his brow. Thinking of that title for Li Yu, that honorable Tang princess, he whispered in mockery, "Aren't they not honorable?"

"Yes, with thin porridge and no salt."

Beside him, an examinee especially seriously replied. Without knowing when, the person standing beside Ning Que had changed into a noble's son – this noble's son wore an outfit of familiar silk robes – his waist was pressed between a gold belt, which a precious jade ornament hung from. At a glance if he wasn't rich, he was wealthy, and he was also his acquaintance.

"Chu YouXian? You actually also came to partake in the Academy exam?" Ning Que turned and looked at that person, and with surprise asked, "A few days ago when I went to the Club, why didn't I hear you mention it?"

This young noble's son was East City's 7th noble Lord's most beloved only son, and also that very day Ning Que first set foot into the Red Sleeves Club and was once chosen by everyone to be berated by a few people together, he was this person surnamed Chu and because his name was 'virtue', his nature broad and generous, it was best to be friends with similar types. That day they first met he was prepared to invite Ning Que to have dinner with some girls, but unfortunately it wasn't meant to be. Afterwards when Ning Que went to the Red Sleeves Club to accompany Shui Zhu'er and the other girls in chatting and ran into him a few times,

and after drinking several cups of wine, they had become familiar.

Chu YouXian was wholeheartedly looking in front, his gaze was slanting squinted at Ning Que, and with his face brimming with pain he said, "The old man at home absolutely forced me to come to take this test, saying something about if someone in ChangAn didn't take the entrance exam, when the time comes to marry, the bride's family will insist on being a bit more picky, and the bridal dowry will need a bit more things sent. I was really forced by that old man with no choice, and could only come."

Ning Que turned his head over, looking at His Highness the Prince amidst talking with each examinee and saying words of encouragement, and in a low voice he said, "The primary exam has long passed, how did you get through?"

Chu YouXian raised his hand in front of him and gestured two words, looking forward he said, "Went through the military department's path."

Ning Que knew this year the examinees recommended by the military were much more than the past year. At first he thought the Court was worried about a shortage of strength in the military – how would he have thought that inside there was so much behind the scenes? Thinking that these past years he was staking his life on a Frontier fortress killing enemies, struggling to cut firewood, and toiling to acquire military merits before getting through the Primary Exam, he could not help but to get a great sense it was unfair, and in a low voice cursed several times, and lamentingly said, "2200 silvers.....half a blanket could cover it all, and it could actually buy entrance into the Academy!"

Hearing this, Sang Sang who had all along stood beside him quietly couldn't help but to raise her head and look at him, inside thinking,

Master you're not happy, why would you insist on bringing up that thing and directly saying it?

"2200? That won't even get past the gate! My family's old man pestered and cried, yelled and begged, and took out 22,000.....and that was just enough for the entrance exam, completely not guaranteeing you can get in!"

Chu YouXian disdainfully glanced at him and said, "Our Tang Dynasty simply doesn't have a government department that dares to take money and guarantee you can get into the Academy. Because for this, without mentioning those high officials, even if His Majesty spoke it wouldn't matter, so you don't need to look down on me. My old man said, today come to take a test of gold plating, afterwards be a little more confident for marriage."

The two of them chatted like this, and Prince Li PeiYan accompanying officials and instructors walked over, his gaze directly ignoring Ning Que and Chu YouXian, and falling onto Sang Sang. Seeing this short and skinny little girl, smiling he turned his head to an instructor and said, "I hadn't thought that there would also be a female examinee at such a young age. This is younger than the Lin Province's Wang Ying by two years right?"

Lin Province's Wang Ying was precisely a young examinee that an Academy instructor brought back from his own village's instruction – this year he was less than 14 years old. Earlier an official had introduced and brought His Highness to him, and the crowd hadn't thought that on this side they would be able to see a small dark-faced little girl surpassing him in youth, only that seeing her clothing it was simply.....

"This is my maid." Ning Que gently clasped his hands in propriety and explained.

The Prince Li PeiYan knew that he had mistaken the person, and his face couldn't help but to show a bit of embarrassment. The officials behind saw and with extreme speed suddenly they quickly widened their eyes. To an Academy instructor they said, "At the opening ceremony, how can a maid be allowed inside with the flow of people?"

That Academy instructor was middle-aged, and like he completely didn't sense the official's anger, he lightly replied, "An ordinary maid is not at all barred from entering the Academy. This is participating in the ceremony, and not to the examination hall. In a while she will not be allowed to enter and that's all."

Being retorted by the instructor with this, the officials were shocked till they had no way of being angry. After all no matter how high his status was, or how weighted his power was, in a place like the Academy, it did not have the slightest use. His Highness the Prince smiled in self mockery, then extended his arm and patted Ning Que's shoulder, and without saying anything further, he led the crowd of high ministers and continued walking forward.

Ning Que used his shoulder and lightly nudged Chu YouXian, watching that instructor next to Li PeiYan, and in a low voice he praised, "Exemplary. This is what is called neither weak nor salty. More and more I like this Academy place."

The bell rung a second time. It was the last call.

The Academy instructors explained the rules of the examination hall expressionlessly, while the examinees were so nervous they couldn't remember because the discipline of the examination hall's for the entrance exam was unexpectedly so lax – neither warning against talking or against questions, only that they were not allowed to tell each other answers.

Stepping with the bell's sound, and stepping past the peach petals scattered on the limestone tiles, with their long robes fluttering the students climbed the stairs, entering various classrooms, preparing to meet the exam. Only Sang Sang stood solitary on the stone plain, and just in this moment, the spring rain again dripped a few drops. She raised her little face and squinted her eyes looking, and opened the big black umbrella she carried on her back.

The Academy Exam and the Tang Dynasty's Imperial Exam had similar content – the entirety of it was divided into six parts: the rites section, music section, shooting section, Imperial section, literary section, and the math section, all counted separately, and then the total score for enrollment. The entrance exam would carry out the written test in the morning, and was exactly the three sections of rites, literary and math – and the very first one was what Tang people were most not good at, or perhaps to say, the least happy with – the math section.

During the test was one period of quietness – on the wall was a window that framed a clear wall of pink plum flowers, just like a picture of a peaceful and beautiful pastel art work, creating an especially suitable environment to study. However after getting that scroll of the math section, the students previously sitting behind their desks seriously with their bosoms full of danger suddenly became a mess, speaking lamentations in a low voice.

"Why is it an integrated question?" There were students painfully pulling their hair.

"Our luck is too bad isn't it?" There were students with pale faces.

Because the rules at the examination hall hadn't forbidden noise, the students couldn't help but to use various ways to express their own dissatisfaction and grief. It was the hardest integrated math question in years of the entrance exam, frequently having a professor of literature and a professor of math draw up the question together. Sometimes examinees taking the test truly couldn't even read anything of the question topic.

Ning Que got the brush resting on the table top. Letting out a deep breath in the slightly cold air, he then tore open the ink scroll, only seeing one question topic on the scroll with about dozens of words that read:

"That year's spring, Master went traveling. Receiving fine wine from Peach Mountain, consequently he sought to climb mountains and taste peach wines, all along picking flowers and drinking wine as he went. At first he cut one catty of peach blossoms, and drank one jug of wine. Afterwards Master regretted the wine, thus he cut one catty of peach blossoms and only drank half a jug of wine, and again cut a catty of peach flowers, and drank half of half of a jug of wine. If he went on like this.....to the mountain peak, and Master drank all of the wine of his pouch, then disappointedly looked all around, and lightly asked all you students: Today how many catties of peach blossoms were cut, and how many jugs of wine were drunk?"

That Year's Spring, I Cut the Peach Blossoms (Part 3)

Because of a bitter childhood, Ning Que was very good at controlling his state of mind – or perhaps very good at pitifully controlling his own inner heart, transforming the dark night into sunlight on his face, and very rarely would the sadness of the changing seasons flash on the scenery of that world. However, today in the examination hall of the Academy entrance exam, looking at those peaches and apricots outside the window and listening to the rising sounds of various integrated fields of math and the like, with difficulty he thought of those hot and cold periods of a career of incessant study of both arts and sciences.

But it was exactly fortunate for that bitter forced career of studying, that the question on the scroll was not difficult to him in any way. After his mind quickly flashed with an answer, he couldn't help but to whisper in a low voice, "This question is too damn stupid* right?"

*二 'èr' means two, but is also Beijing slang for stupid.

Indeed it was quite stupid, because the answer was exactly two.

Ning Que moved his wrist and dipped the brush into the inkstone, and very carefully wrote down his answer. "Master drank two jugs of wine, and cut all the peach blossoms of the mountain."

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At a distant path away from a pavilion, that Daoist looked at the black and white of a chessboard. His right hand outstretched in the air,

incessantly plucking, as though he was playing with an instrument or playing with the spring wind. Suddenly his index finger slightly paused; then with this motion, a black piece jumped from the piece holder beside the chessboard in a streak of light, and with a snap it fell onto the chessboard, exactly in a spot where the horizontal and vertical lines intersected.

As the Leader of the Southern Gate of the Clear Sky Way, and the Tang Empire's State Master, Li QingShan freely and calmly played like this naturally and unsurprisingly. Strange at the moment was, his brows were knitted extremely aggressively, as though he was a bit afraid of the monk on the other side.

That monk called himself Huang Yang. Lately he was stationed in ChangAn's South City's Ten Thousand Wild Geese Pagoda Temple. Rumor had it that this person once visited a wasteland of some unknowable place, and was able to use unsurpassed cultivating Buddhist arts. Many years ago, he met the current Tang Empire's Emperor by a chance coincidence, and they became bound as brothers – since then he became known as the Tang Imperial Prince. The monks pursue ascetic practice, and ordinarily he would be sitting in Ten Thousand Wild Geese Pagoda chanting sutras and translating books, and very rarely would he come into contact with outsiders of the Temple.

The monk Huang Yang calmly looked at the pieces on the chessboard. His eyes slowly blinked, and a white chess piece slowly rose from the piece holder, slowly arriving above the chessboard, and slowly fell down without creating the slightest sound, extremely softly. The white piece sealed some air hole, and without seeing him doing any kind of motion, with only his gaze gently moving a black piece that had been taken to the side of the board – that place already had 7 or 8 pieces.

The Tang Empire's State Master and the Imperial Younger Brother playing chess – naturally no one dared to go forward and bother them. Those little monks and little Daoists all left by themselves extremely far away from the path on the bank with no chance of them seeing the two experts play, or else if they were allowed to see such a marvelous scene, they definitely would give big praise.

Li QingShan watched the black and white pieces on the chessboard, and shook his head. Turning he said, "When His Majesty is in the Palace, he leaves one person. When His Majesty leaves the Palace, then two have to await Him, since when did this become a rule? In a time like this, who would dare to do a mishap towards the Tang Emperor? Not to mention today when His Majesty went to the Academy, could there still be someone that dares to make trouble at the Academy?"

Huang Yang faintly smiled, and looking at him he said, "I don't know."

Li QingShan said with frustration, "You've already heard about the incident with Chao XiaoShu right? Truly a pity, if back then he could've entered the Fate-seeker realm, then as for us two fellows, we'd still be bodyguards following His Majesty every day."

Huang Yang shook his head and replied, "Without these years of correspondence with the JiangHu, and acquiring this change in comprehension by observing the lake in the Palace, even for a talented person, who would dare say that they would enter the Fate-seeker realm?"

Li QingShan shook his head and said, "Back then you should've still been at that place watching over the firewood and fires of the temple, so I don't know the specific circumstances. Chao XiaoShu at first had a

chance to test into the Academy, just that he couldn't get into the second floor. If he could enter the second floor, he would have the fortune of speaking with Master personally – how could needing to enter Fate-seeker be something hard?"

Huang Yang was silent for a long time, and then softly answered, "If he could enter the Academy and get Master's enlightenment, that would indeed be a blessing."

Li QingShan looked at his clean face, and suddenly with a self-mocking smile said, "The Court and people all say that we QingShan and Huang Yang don't see each other, how would they know that because of the Academy we truly can't meet?"

Of the two people, the Daoist and the Monk in the pavilion, one was the guardian of the Buddhist Sect's orthodox monastery, and the other was the leader of the Clear Sky Way's South Gate. No matter what they thought inside, their status and position destined them to be unable to take half a step into the Academy. Just like how today the Tang Emperor led a flock of ministers to participate in the great opening ceremony of the Academy – these were the most powerful people beyond the Tang Empire that were most honored, and yet they could only quietly and calmly play chess far away.

"When did Master leave?"

"After school starts he will leave ChangAn."

"Master has it hard."

Huang Yang the Monk calmly said to State Master Li QingShan, "I really want to know just how high Master has gone."

After a long silence Li QingShan said, "My first teacher once said, Master is as many as several floors high."

Huang Yang the Monk hesitated slightly, and slowly a sincere smile arose on his face, then immediately after his lips parted with a sigh – a sigh like the spring breeze passing a willow, with an indefinite meaning. "The second floor is already very high. For Master to actually be several floors high.....that is truly high."

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The afternoon was the literary exam. When the math section ended, it was closely followed with the literature section and the rites section. Previously still leaning on the feeling of pride from extreme self-satisfaction, Ning Que instantly was blindsided – Sang Sang's worries were reasonable. All day long busily eating hot and sour noodles with a fried egg, and going to the Red Sleeves to accompany girls and chat, braving the rain and going to Spring Wind Pavilion to kill; a pitiful youth worried about earning a few silvers today to carry on a few pockets truly didn't have time for those several entrance exam topic scrolls and carry them back – and even if he carried them back it was no use. A fellow who spent the whole year on making a living in the Grasslands, where would he get what things? If he was to write a response from memory about the Daoists it was no problem, but about anything else was unthinkable.

Ning Que didn't think about becoming a blank test hero – that was too pretentious, as pretentious as the State Master and the Imperial Brother in the pavilion outside of the Academy. So he honestly swapped two

brushes, extremely honestly cramming two exam scrolls from head to tail. As for the contents of his response, in the end it didn't have half a relationship with the topic – that wasn't within the scope of what he had considered, he was just absurdly hoping that the beautiful and tidy scroll appearance would make the Academy instructors score him with compassion and mercy.

While responding to topics, he also touched upon a small idea – because he knew that within these two sections, his sole advantage was that his handwriting was better than the people beside him by much more, so since the math section, he put all of his attention on writing. Also.....he meticulously used his own very smallest Hairpin Flower Small Script.

Using Hairpin Flower Small Script wasn't to hide anything – alright, indeed it was to hide his gender, wanting to have instructors think the owner of this exam paper was a beautiful, stupid little Miss of an official's family and skilled at letters, thus giving a little more unspeakable of a score.

The bell once again rung, and the literary text had concluded. Ning Que walked from the examination hall with a shortage of enthusiasm. To Sang Sang with a face full of expectancy he opened his hands, showing an innocent expression, and he prepared to accompany Chu YouXian on a special trip to hastily find a place to eat at the Academy, then to begin preparing for the martial test in the afternoon.

Regarding the three examinations of music, shooting and Imperial examination sections, Ning Que was extremely confident. So facing the Academy's instructors and officials with an earnest gaze, to that room full of musical instruments, he didn't hesitate to choose.....to give up.

It's not like I'm the musician for the Red Sleeves – how would I have the skills to play these? He was annoyed thinking these damn words, following the flow of examinees to the great grassfield outside of the Academy. Unknowingly when, tens of pairs of army steeds had been led to the grassfield, and a military officer in charge had come from the army and stood to a side, indifferently looking at the eager or perhaps pale faces of the students.

The shooting section was shooting arrows, and the Imperial section was a free choice for riding a horse or driving a horse. Of course Ning Que chose to ride a horse – in the Grasslands for these few years, he always dealt with horses and arrows, and believed he wouldn't be lacking more than anyone else.

Beside the grassfield at a distance, Sang Sang holding up the big black umbrella with her small fists cheered him on.

He smiled, and with an encouraged mindset he turned to the field and went over.

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While the examinees who were participating in the entrance exam took the last three martial tests, within a clear and bright open room in the Academy, instructors were surrounding the place reading and scoring examinations from the morning's three sections. The vast majority of instructors were already white haired, who had gone through this scene an unknowable amount of times, and were naturally not nervous, grasping teapots and sucking on smoking pipes leisurely and relaxedly –

and occasionally writing down a score in ink and occasionally lifting their heads and chatting with their colleagues. An instructor commented on the difficulty of today's exam papers saying,

"This year's entrance exam was from Senior Brother. His temperament is gentle and naturally it wouldn't be too hard. If it was like the last topics from Second Senior Brother, who knows if there would've been a bunch of crying and weeping in the exam hall today?"

"The rites section and the literary section were still fine. This math section's question was simply giving away points – anyone would know that Master that old man is fond of wine. Half of one jug and continuously halving it into one drop, would Master still need to use his sword to chop that drop of wine into halves? Such a simple math section and there's actually this many examinees that got it wrong. I truly don't know how their brains work!"

An instructor curiously asked, "Even if it seems simple it's not simple, but what I'm more worried about is, back then when Master was traveling abroad and first went to XiLing Divine Mountain, how many jugs of wine did he drink? How many catties of peach blossoms did he cut?"

Someone answered with a laugh, "That year Master drank seven big jugs of wine, and plucked all of the peach blossoms bare on XiLing Divine Mountain."

"But it's said that, that year the one who drank wine was Master, and the one who plucked bare the peach blossoms on XiLing was someone else, Senior Uncle who followed Master traveling. I also think that Master has a refined temperament, rather Senior Uncle's violent temper seems more fitting."

Mentioning the words 'Senior Uncle', the Instructors were a bit taciturn, and then returned to normal. Someone said smiling, "But on our Academy lawn, those peach trees were personally planted by Master. Every time those old Daoists come from XiLing's Clear Sky Temple, the unsightliness of their faces are even more miserable than when their mothers died – I really think Master is very bad!"

The instructors within the scoring room all had a big laugh. Making fun of the world's most sacred XiLing shrine, for them it was a daily form of routine entertainment and the laughing seemed to be especially arrogant.

It must be said that the Academy south of ChangAn City was truly a very wondrous place.

The instructor's laughter gradually subsided, and began to turn to scoring. "Master drank two jugs of wine, and cut the whole mountain's peach blossoms....is the correct answer. Before in the exam hall I noticed that an examinee called Ning Que answered the quickest, and could be regarded as top class."

"Top class without objection, just that I have one question – why did that examinee answer with two (er) jugs and not two jugs of wine?"

"Perhaps that is a personal habit? Or perhaps this "two" word has something particular to it? It truly is puzzling."

Chapter 75: That Year's Spring, I Cut the Peach Blossoms

The instructors each shook their heads, showing that they didn't understand why, and thus someone piqued interest in this examinee called Ning Que. Shifting ahead to both his rites section and literary section exam papers, at first those instructors were curiously wanting to see whether this examinee could enter the top class, but unexpectedly they saw two trash exam papers of flowery decorations without a single thing, and couldn't help but to angrily and heavily smack the table, passing the exam paper for everyone to see, and lamentingly say:

"In the exam papers over the years, who has seen such a beautiful and neat paper, such perfect hairpin flower small script before? But who has also seen an examinee so ignorant and incompetent! Absolutely must be Ding-rank at the end! Truly angering this old man!"

An instructor holding that exam paper shook his head in admiration, and smiling he said, "Even though the characters have written nonsense, but this hairpin flower small script is truly very pleasing to the eye. Just on these characters alone raised him to Ding-rank."

"Unthinkable!" The very first instructor that showed pity angrily said, "A male examinee specifically wrote such beautiful hairpin flower small script – his intentions are inconceivable! What did he want to do? He wanted to insult the intelligence of the instructors at our Academy, and maliciously challenge the dignity of the Academy!"

A very simple strategy in the examination hall had been elevated into the high degree of intelligence and dignity, and very naturally these two exam papers had been considered as trash and lowered to the very

lowest of the Ding Level.

At the moment, Ning Que did not at all know that his own literary section and rites section had already been sentenced to death, but he was very clear that these two sections could not get a very good score. Now the music section had already been abandoned – like that could he get through the entrance exam, and become an official student of the Academy? All of it would depend on whether he could get high scores on the shooting and the Imperial sections, and they absolutely had to be the highest scores.

On the grass of the Academy pairs of horses were whining; examinees carrying number plates entered the exam field in succession, and then were randomly paired with the army horses of the exam field. The Tang Dynasty promoted martial spirit – most of the candidates didn't anticipate choosing a horse instead of driving a carriage.

The examinees who hadn't had their turn standing outside of the fencing were intently watching – watching some of the examinees gallop their horses calmly and freely and zig-zagging; watching some examinees pathetically falling onto the grassy ground, covered in mud from head to toe; watching some of the army horses neighing and leaping. If not for those army officers urgently hurrying to intercept, perhaps some those examinees would've been kicked. The examinees generally understood that the Imperial section of the exam still had some element of luck – if you could randomly pick a calm, obedient and healthy warhorse, the chance of getting through naturally rose higher by a bit. But if you chose a stubborn, ill-tempered warhorse, not falling off was considered good.

Since they were being used as mounts for the entrance exam of the Academy, before the event the military first did a bit of a selection process. Most of the horses all appeared strong and powerful and

seemed extremely disciplined – quietly standing aside, watching the fluffy green grass underfoot and the peaches and apricots dotting beyond the fence, and hadn't done anything they shouldn't.

On the grass field, a black stallion attracted the gaze of all the examinees – gazes of alertness and restlessness, and even alarm. Already three examinees had been thrown off by that temperamental wild horse, and after a female examinee wearing bright red clothing was thrown off, that fierce horse unexpectedly tried to use its hooves to stomp her. The scene at the moment truly could be said to be perilous.

Seeing that red-clothed female examinee being helped beyond the fencing and crying quietly, the faces of those examinees that still hadn't gone up became extremely unsightly; each silently prayed to Clear Sky, and even started to secretly ask Buddha, praying that they would not come across that fierce horse.

After the results of the lots had come out, the examinees waiting to go up finally let out a breath, then threw sincere gazes of compassion and sympathy at that poor fellow – there is always someone with bad luck, and the one with bad luck was a male protagonist. This was probably exactly the principle of without having weathered stormy hardship, how would you see a rainbow? Without coming across a fierce horse, how could skills be shown?

Under the gazes of sympathy, Ning Que slowly walked entering the grass field surrounded by fencing, his expression super calm, but inside he was silently muttering curses. With skills born and polished from the Grasslands, setting right a fierce horse with rambunctious temperament was naturally nothing, only that he was thinking of wanting to get high scores on the Imperial section; if he had to spend time taming the horse, he was worried that time would be too tight.

On the grass field, all the warhorses wore mouthpieces, and that unruly black stallion was no exception. But what was curious was, this black horse leaned on the side of the fence, and no matter how the officer pulled it, it wouldn't move – extending its head to reach the peach trees beyond the fence, with its tongue rolling and swallowing several young peach blossoms, chomping chomping chewing, completely in spite of the inconvenience of the mouthpiece across its mouth.

The black horse chewed on pink peaches, from time to time chased its tail, appearing extremely happy. It's appearance looking like it needed whacks and even more whacks.

The officer in charge of this horse wiped the sweat on his forehead, and helplessly spread out his hands and walked towards Ning Que, sympathetically saying, "No one knows what's with this horse today. I feel like it's a bit crazy for peach blossoms. You be careful."

The officer exited out of the fence, and Ning Que walked to the side of the horse's neck, extending his hand and patting the coarse and thick horse neck. That horse impatiently tilted his head and squinted a glance at him, its gaze full of disdain and resentment.

In regards to taming horses, Ning Que had several hundreds of tricks, but in this moment he had to strive for time, so he pretended like he completely hadn't seen the black horse's provocative look, and with a faint smile he said, "Big Black, be nice to me."

The youth with a dimple smiled very innocently, and spoke with a very innocent tone, "Or else I'll butcher you."

The black horse suddenly became fearful and restless – it didn't know why random threats from this youth beside him would make him become a pathetic rocking horse, it only knew it clearly felt peerless, truly icy-cold killing intent. The mane on its neck was blown into disorder by the wind, and its four hooves suddenly became stiff – from its slightly ajar mouth, those pink and velvet-like blossoms streamed falling from its mouth.

Warhorses didn't understand human speech, but knew human nature, especially warhorses that had long been on the battlefield. They could sense what was true killing intent, and what is true danger.

Ning Que killed men when he was four, when he was five he killed, when he was six he killed, killing people until he was sixteen. From ChangAn he slaughtered to Min Mountain, slaughtered to Wei City, slaughtered to the Grasslands, slaughtered to Shu Bi Lake, and then slaughtered his way back again to ChangAn City. Beneath his blade, he didn't know how much blood it spilled, or how much blood it sprayed from heads he cut. The Lumberjack of Shu Bi Lake rampaged across the Grasslands and even the most powerful wild horse chief sniffing his scent would surrender.

People probably couldn't sense Ning Que's danger, but horses definitely could, especially when he said he would butcher you.

Outside of the fencing a burst of shocked cries sounded; whether they were examinees preparing to go up, or those alert officers ensuring the safety of the examinees, all of them shot their gazes at one corner of the grass field, their gazes with expressions of shock and incredulousness.

In that spot of the grassfield, Ning Que was pulling that big black horse, slowly walking to the starting line. The big black horse previously showed its exceptional unruliness and violence, compared to now it was quietly, compliantly behaving, appearing like a well-trained maid.

Sang Sang standing at a distant grassy slope put the big black umbrella under her butt and sat. Using her hand she covered her little mouth and yawned. On her small face was an expression full of boredom – in the mortal world, probably only she had never been worried about her master's life.

Chapter 76

From :

<https://darktranslations.wordpress.com/jiang-ye/chapter-76/>

Lightning is naturally white, and sometimes possesses a purplish tinge, but never black. However today, a flash of black lightning flashed across the grass field outside of the college.

The candidates watched as the black horse bolted out of the band of colts with incomparable speed. It was a stunning scene, the other candidates were awkwardly trying to ride their horses, while the red-shirted girl stood outside the fence with a tear stained face.

They watched Ning Que ride the black horse; his body bent like a defoliated leaf. These examinees just couldn't understand what Ning Que had done to this unruly black horse, to suddenly turn her obedient and show her amazing true strength.

The grass field of the college stretched quite far, but the area fenced off for the examination location was not that large. Before the red clothed girl had realised what had happened the test had already ended. The black mare had leapt ahead of the rest of the examinees with a ridiculous velocity and had reached its destination in nearly half the time it took the others. Everyone was astonished.

Ning Que jumped off the horse's back and wiped away the sweat on his forehead. He patted the back of the black horse in satisfaction before slapping the horse's butt, ordering her to leave.

The black horse was relieved, it was as if she could go back to her peaceful world after experiencing hell. She happily rubbed Ning Que's shoulder before charging away from him. The horse didn't even look back as it ran away faster than when it had ran in the test.

The candidates at the entrance of the pen gazed at Ning Que in silence, as if they were looking at a monster. They were tempted to ask how he managed to tame the black horse, but they couldn't formulate any words, and just stood there, staring in awe as he passed them.

Ning Que felt the piercing gaze of the others on him. He frowned, and closed his eyes as he walked towards the location of the archery examination. If he managed to get the attention of the examinees and examiners he might be able to make up for his terrible academic results. He did not wish for this attention, but if he didn't achieve outstanding results in these two subjects, he would never pass the testing.

He had extensively prepared for the past few years, spending his entire savings and even gave up his status in Chang An City. If he didn't make it at the end and fail to get selected into the college, his past tolerance would turn into sorrow. Nonetheless, he wouldn't accept this fate; he would create a sensation to pass the test.

Just as he had decided to leave the hall, a young lady blocked his path. The girl possessed deep eyebrows and bright eyes. She was quite splendid in her red robe fastened by a tight belt. Her body emitted a refreshing scent, while her face bore light traces of tears.

"How did you do that?" The red clothed girl asks, enraged. "Why did she

refuse to follow my orders?"

Ning Que thinks deeply before replying straight faced, "Maybe my personality is better?"

"Personality?" The girl replied, dazed before rapidly following up with, "What do you mean?"

"I mean, maybe I have a better luck."

Ning Que spread his hands, smiling innocently and then politely requested her to move aside. He then ran toward the archery hall.

The girl looked at him blankly. She was the daughter of the General, Yun Hui, and was pretty and open-hearted. She was so famous in Chang An City that nobody dared to give her a perfunctory reply. She only realised that Ning Que had left moments after he had escaped. She turned around and fiercely glared at his back. She stomped her foot, "Who is that?"

The candidates had researched him, and one of the candidates reached out and told her, "Someone looked at the names list and found his name was Ning Que. He was recommended by the military, but he doesn't seem to have a special background, don't pay him any mind Miss Si Tu."

The girl in the red robe was displeased, "If he doesn't have an unusual background how could he control that black horse?"

"Maybe, it does because of his good luck?" The young man replied

awkwardly.

The other young man dressed in purple walked forward, furrowing his eyebrows as he gazed at Ning Que, "He might have gotten the military recommendation from a frontier fortress, which would explain his good riding skills. However I don't agree that he doesn't have a background. Out of the one hundred candidates, he was the only one to bring a personal maid. This embarrassed the crown prince. It's obvious that he has lived a pampered life. It could be possible that he is a noble from Qing He City."

What is so great about Qing He City? It isn't even in the dominion of the first emperor." Miss Si Tu became serious requesting, "Sister Wu Cai, could you check his origin and background? I wish to know how this happened."

Not far away from the nobles from Chang An City, there were several candidates recommended by the military who were standing together. A retired captain in his early thirties shook his head as he told his companions, "He couldn't have accomplished this with luck. If he received a military recommendation like we did, he must have served in the frontier armies. But he is so young, to have gained these skills..."

As if to prove the man's hypothesis, a violent scream echoed throughout the examination hall. People panicked as the once tame black horse brutally stomped his hoof, kicking the man who mounted him heavily. The burly candidate fell awkwardly to the turf in shame.

Ning Que didn't know of this conversation, but if he knew that the captain had praised his ability, he might also appraise himself, "I do have three secret weapons."

His archery, riding and weapons skills were quite good. These skills are his best by far, sharpened by his time surviving in the jungle. He had the confidence to survive combat with a combatant of the Lower level of Dong Xuan. It was too simple for him to handle the archery examination.

These tests were different from the academic test, and didn't compare his results to those of other candidates. Therefore, he showed his full strength, attempting to surpass as many others as possible. He held his bow and arrows one hundred steps away from the target. He seemed to not even consider the targets, just aiming and shooting with unfailing accuracy.

The rest of the candidates were sweating when confronted with the bows and targets.

This is what Ning Que wanted, He raised his bow and pulled the bowstring back to his nose, releasing the string. A loud smack resounded through the air, as the arrow accurately struck on the bulls-eye.

Ning Que had already drawn and knocked his arrow before his previous shot hit the target, and aimed for the bulls-eye. As expected, it hit again.

His marksmanship was slow and unremarkable. However he steadily shot arrow after arrow rhythmically, as if playing a comfortable melody.

He possessed a cold demeanor, standing in standard style, the tempo of his shots, and the extremely accurate marksmanship. As each arrow left his quiver, he attracted more and more attention. Candidates, examiners and even two commanders from the military watched as Ning Que drilled

arrow after arrow into his targets..

In their view, the young man who held the bow had turned into a veteran warrior who wouldn't even blink in the eyes of an raging opposing army.

The commander watched as Ning Que shot his last arrow and told his subordinates, "Investigate his past, tell me which general taught him his skills. If he doesn't get admitted into the college, recruit him into the military immediately."

After a while the commander touched his grey hair and said in a low pitched voice, "Keep this a secret, his original force wouldn't be willing to let him go if they knew of his skills. If we, the Yu Lin force would need to get him with stealth."

At dusk, the six grand examinations had results had finally ended. The emperor and empress returned into their castle in Chang An City. The prince and officers were to stay behind and handle the remaining procedures and formalities. The results would be announced soon.

Hundreds of candidates stood silently on the large stonyfield, staring at the board standing on their tiptoes like hundreds of hungry geese waiting to be fed.

A few of the examiners walked down the stairs and politely greeted the prince. After confirming with all the officers, the examiners stepped up to the wooden table and glued a large red paper to the board.

Instantly the candidates started to make a large commotion. Like hundreds of geese which had finally received their food, they couldn't

suppress their emotions and rushed towards the board.

Ning Que was pushed back by the crowd. Finally, he found his way to the board and squeezed into a spot in front of the board. He could finally look at his academic results.

At the bottom section of the paper he found his name.

"Ning Que.... Grade D, Lowest."

His results for the writing test were also of the worst level.

He rubbed his head angrily, mumbling, "This is unexpected. I wrote a lot of nonsense, but I did write so many words. Plus my calligraphy is good. Could it be that my grader was a female?"

[EN: No idea what this is supposed to mean, I hope it isn't sexist]

The people behind him couldn't stop themselves from laughing, and teased him, "I thought you were a genius from Nan Ji. But you are just an uncultivated wild man."

The young woman who taunted him was the red robed girl. Maybe she had a personal grudge against him, but when the results had been released, she left her companions and squeezed in next to Ning Que, trying to figure out his results.

Ning Que was unaware that this girl was the daughter of the General Yun Hui, Miss Si Tu Yi Lan. Thus he stared at her dully before turning

away, holding Miss Sang Sang and walked out of the crowd.

The red-robed girl turned to him in surprise and shouted, "Why aren't you looking at the rest of the results."

Ning Que didn't even bother to turn back, calmly replying, "Distinction."

[EN: No idea what distinction means, but that was what was provided to me.]

The girl and the people behind were astonished by his reply. How egotistical could he be? How could he know his results without looking at the board.

Miss Sang Sang raised her small face and looked at him, confused.

Ning Que gazed at her and explained with a smile, "They are far inferior than me when it comes to pretending to be cool."

